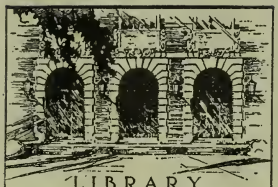
# The Master of the Ceremonies

By

G. Manville Fenn



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THE

# MASTER OF THE CEREMONIES.

## A Novel.

BY

GEORGE MANVILLE FENN,

AUTHOR OF 'DOUBLE CUNNING,' 'THE PARSON O' DUMFORD,' ETC., ETC.

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THE

# MASTER OF THE CEREMONIES.

## CHAPTER I.

### AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN.

Claire shrank back for a moment, and her natural womanly timidity urged her to turn and hurry home by the way she had come.

But that would be showing Major Rockley that she was afraid of him, and this she wished to keep a secret in her own breast.

Bowing slightly, then, she declined the offer of his hand, stepped over the stile, and went on.

With anyone else Rockley would have felt bound to retire, but he only laughed. Claire was the daughter of the poor minister of fashion, who lived by the fees and offerings he received from new-comers; and he did not feel himself called upon to treat her as a lady.

'Why, my dear Miss Denville,' he said, laughing, 'what have I done that you should try to cut me like this? I am ignorant. Come, shake hands.'

He held his out, as he walked by her side, and she turned upon him a look full of indignation.

'Are you not making a mistake, sir?' she said coldly.

'Mistake? No. My dear Claire, why do you treat me like this? How absurd it is to refuse my letters, and play coquette when we meet. Here have I been watching for such an opportunity as this for weeks.'

Claire's eyes flashed at his assumption, but she made no reply, and walked on.

'How can you be so absurd,' he whispered, as he kept pace with her step for step, 'when you know how I love you?'

'Major Rockley!' she cried, stopping short and facing him, 'by what right do you insult me like this?'

'How beautiful she is!' he said in a low tone.

Claire bit her lips, and, divining that he was disposed to treat her as one in an entirely different rank of life, she hurried on along the path, with the tall corn waving on either side, trembling with dread and indignation, as she realized that he was behaving to her as he might to some servant-girl.

'Say what you like to me. Be angry. Punish me. I cannot help it,' he whispered. 'Your beauty maddens me,

as it has done all these weary months, and I must speak to you now.'

'Major Rockley, I am alone and unprotected. I ask you, as a gentleman, to leave me.'

'And as an officer and a gentleman I would leave you, but my passion masters me. Sweet Claire, whom I love so dearly, how can you be so cruel and so hard?'

He tried to take her hand, but she shrank from him and turned back.

'No, no, little one, you are not going to serve me like that!' he cried, darting before her. 'Come, how can you be so absurd?' he whispered. 'We are quite alone. No one can see our meeting, and yet you are trifling with me, and wasting golden moments. You know I love you.'

'Once more, Major Rockley, will you leave me? You insult me by staying.'

'No, I will not leave you,' he whispered excitedly; 'and I do not insult you.'

'I am alone now, sir, but I have a father—brothers, who shall call you to account for this!' she cried, with her eyes full of indignation.

'Don't,' he whispered imploringly. 'You make your eyes flash and your face light up in a way that drives me frantic. Claire, if you speak to me like that again, I shall risk being seen, and take you to my heart to cover those lips with kisses. No, no; don't shrink away; only be

gentle with me, and talk sensibly. Let us be closer friends, dear. Come, let there be an end to all this coy nonsense. There, we understand one another now. That's better.'

He seized her hand, and drew it through his arm; but, with a display of strength that he had not expected, she snatched it away, and stood pale with anger and indignation.

She hurried forward the next moment, but he laughingly kept at her side.

Claire turned and retreated, but he was still there; and, choking down her sobs, she walked as fast as she could towards the stile she had crossed.

It seemed evident to her that the Major must know the reason for her visit to the fisherman's cottage, or he would never have dared to treat her with such bold insolence; and as she walked on he kept close beside her, pressing his suit in the most daringly insulting manner, while she ceased her protests now, and walked on in silence.

'It is the only way to deal with her,' he said to himself; 'and, after this outburst to keep up appearances, we shall be on the best of terms.'

Claire had gone farther in her excitement than she had thought possible, and it seemed now that she would never reach the stile. Beyond that, there might be people who would help her; and in any case, the fishermen's cottages were not many hundred yards away.

In spite of her silence, the Major kept on his passionate addresses and protestations, pleading his inability to obtain a hearing from her before; and at last, irritated by her silence, he caught her by the arm and held it fast.

'No, no; you are not going yet,' he said, speaking angrily. 'What sort of a man do you take me for, that you play with me like this?'

'Major Rockley, will you loose my arm?'

'Claire Denville, will you promise to meet me to-night where I will name?'

'I am a defenceless woman, sir, and this is an insult—an outrage. Will you loose my arm?'

'You are a cruel coquette,' he cried passionately. 'Is this your treatment, after the months of glances you have given me to lure me on?'

'Will you loose my arm, sir?'

'Will you be a sensible girl?' he whispered. 'How can you be so absurd? Look about you: we are too far off for anyone to see who we are, and if they could see us, why should we care? What is the world to us? Come, Claire, my darling.'

He tried to draw her towards him, but she struggled to get free and reach the stile in the tall hedge that separated them from the bare downs beyond.

The tears of rage and indignation were in Claire's eyes as she felt her helplessness, and saw how thoroughly she was

in Rockley's power. There seemed to be nothing she could do but scream for help, and from that she shrank.

Turning suddenly upon him, with her eyes flashing, she exclaimed:

'Major Rockley! as a gentleman I ask you to cease this cowardly pursuit.'

'Claire Denville, as the woman I adore and have set my mind to win, I ask you to cease this silly heroic nonsense. My dear child, is it to make terms?'

She snatched her hand by an angry movement from his grasp, and reached the stile; but he was too quick for her, catching her and drawing her back to clasp her in his arms.

'You shall not say I wasted my opportunity,' he whispered. 'If I am to be punished by you, it shall be for something more than words. This kiss is to be the first of millions that you shall pay me back, and—— Curse the fellow!'

There was a quick step, a hand was laid on the stile, and Richard Linnell vaulted over, white with jealous anger. For, coming along the downs, he had seen Claire cross the stile, followed by Rockley, and, half mad with rage, he had gazed at them for a moment or two, and then, feeling that all was over, and that there was no more love for him in the world, since the woman he had worshipped could be so light as to make appointments with the greatest libertine in the town, he walked straight back for the parade.

It was all plain enough; there had been an understanding between Claire and the Major, and hence that serenade. But for the horrible accident that night Claire would have come to the window and answered to the musical call.

What a boyish, childish idiot he had been: dreaming always of a vain, weak, frivolous woman, whom he had in his blind idolatry endowed with all the beauties and virtues of her sex.

'Well,' he said with a scornful laugh, 'I ought to have known how artificial she would be. Like father, like daughter; but it is cruel, cruel work.'

He laughed bitterly.

'What an idiot I am!' he cried angrily. 'A boy in such matters—a child. Well, it is a lesson. I might have known that she would be as ready to receive attentions as her sister, and now I may go, and console myself by making love to the handsome actress who is ready to make love to me.'

'Another actress,' he said aloud, as he strode on with his jealous anger up to boiling-point, his face flushed, and his teeth set fast.

'Liar!' he exclaimed. 'Fool! Idiot again! I will not believe it. Claire Denville is too true and sweet to listen to a man like that.'

He turned and went back faster than he had come, but he had walked some distance, and the return journey gave

him time to cool a little and to ask himself whether he was going to watch—to act the eavesdropper—and whether this was a manly part to play.

His indecision increased as he approached the down side of the stile, and he was about to turn and retreat when an excited voice, speaking loudly, sent a thrill through him, and running to the opening he leaped over into the corn-field.

At the sight of Linnell, Claire, who had been up to now strong and heroic, grew feeble and helpless.

'Mr. Linnell! Help!' she cried, as she struggled to reach him; and as Rockley, white with fury at the interruption, loosed his hold, Richard Linnell was upon him, striking him a blow full in the chest, which sent him staggering back to fall amongst the corn.

Linnell would have followed, but he caught sight of Claire tottering towards the stile, and he turned to help her, but Rockley had sprung up and, with a hoarse cry of rage, struck at Linnell with his riding-whip, the plaited whale-bone falling upon his cheek, and making a weal right across his face.

Major Rockley had better have restrained his rage, for in an instant that blow transformed Richard Linnell, the calm and quiet, into a savage.

He turned round with a roar more than a cry, and sprang upon Rockley; there was a fierce struggle, ending in the

riding-whip being torn from its owner's grasp, and for the space of a couple of minutes there was the sound of the lash cutting through the air, and the blows that fell upon the tight undress uniform.

No words were uttered, but there was the scuffling of feet, the hoarse panting of excited men, and the corn was trampled down.

'There,' cried Linnell at last, flinging Rockley from him, and throwing the whip in his face, 'dog and coward! You have had the thrashing you deserved. Strike me again if you dare.'

Major Rockley picked up the whip, and brushed the dust from his uniform. He strove hard to make his convulsed face smooth and to force a smile, while he mastered the desire to writhe and utter impatient cries, so keen was the agony he felt.

'No,' he said, in a low hissing whisper, 'you are a stronger man than I, and when we meet again it shall be on equal terms.'

He accompanied his words with a vindictive look that told Richard Linnell plainly enough how they would encounter next.

He repressed a shudder, and then a pang that seemed to pierce his heart shot through him, for with a malicious smile Rockley said:

'I did not know the lady had made an appointment with

you. Of course, she had to keep up appearances. But there : I'll say no more.'

He raised his cap mockingly, and went off across the cornfield, leaving Richard Linnell stung to the heart, his brow knit, and his eyes fixed upon Claire, who, white as ashes, and her face convulsed by the agony within her breast, crouched where she had sunk upon the lower steps of the stile.

## CHAPTER II.

### 'IMPOSSIBLE!'

'CLAIRE—Miss Denville,' cried Richard Linnell, mastering the cruel thoughts suggested by Rockley's words, 'how dared that scoundrel insult you like this!'

'Hush!' said Claire agitatedly. 'Don't—pray don't speak to me. I cannot bear it.'

'You are ill. You are faint. Let me help you over these bars and get you to one of the cottages.'

'No; I shall be better directly. Don't speak to me now.'

She bent down, covered her face with her hands, and the tears came now in a passionate burst, while he went down on his knee beside her, laid one hand upon her arm, and, his doubts and suspicions all driven away by her grief, tried to whisper words of comfort as he bade her be calm.

Major Rockley had walked with jaunty military stride for the first two or three hundred yards with assumed calmness; then he gave vent to his rage in a torrent of oaths, and strode on rapidly out of sight, beating the air fiercely with

his whip, and leaving the fields clear of his presence as Richard Linnell knelt by the sobbing girl.

'Miss Denville—Claire,' he said again, as he now possessed himself of her hand, while in his anger and remorse at having doubted her he poured forth his words in quick, excited tones.

'I had not thought to speak to you like this, and at such a time, but I cannot bear to see you weep—it cuts me to the heart, for I love you—Claire, dear Claire, I love you dearly as man can love.'

'Oh, hush, hush!' she moaned piteously, weak now with her emotion and the scene she had gone through.

'I must speak now,' he went on. 'I have no opportunities of seeing you and telling you all I feel. Claire I would have come and asked permission to address you, but I have been obliged to feel that my presence was not welcome to Mr. Denville, and you—you have been so cold and distant to me of late.'

She did not speak, but kept one hand to her bent-down face, while he held the other tightly clasped in his.

'You do not speak,' he whispered. 'Claire—you are not angry? I have suffered so—there, I confess—such jealous thoughts, such bitter cruel thoughts, though I had no right—no claim upon your love. But now, forgive me—only tell me—there was nothing between you and that man?'

She raised her head quickly, and dropped her hand.

'You ask me that!' she said proudly.

'Forgive me. You would if you knew all. I felt that you had come to meet him, and I was tortured with these jealous doubts, but I would not believe, and I came, as you saw. And now, Claire, one word—my love!'

Her eyes half closed as he drew her towards him; her lips trembled, and her colour went and came. Then, as if her memory, that had been veiled for the moment, tore aside the film of forgetfulness, she thrust him from her, and, with a look of anguish in her eyes, started to her feet.

'No, no!' she cried with a shiver; 'it is impossible!'

'Hush! don't say that,' he whispered. 'Claire, I could not bear it. I know I am not well-to-do, but I love you. I cannot offer you a rich home, but I give you a love that is wholly yours. Don't—don't refuse me—don't make me think that you despise me.'

'No, no, it is not that,' she sobbed wildly. 'You must not speak to me. It is impossible.'

'Impossible?' he cried, holding her hands tightly.

'Yes, impossible.'

'No,' he said with a quiet smile, 'it is not impossible. You will grow to the knowledge by-and-by that there is one who lives for your sake, whose every thought is yours, and these little obstacles will melt away when you know me as I am. Claire, I only ask for a little hope—to go away with the thought that I have no rival for your love.'

'Don't speak to me—don't think of me again!' she cried, with a wild look in her face. 'Heaven bless you, Mr. Linnell! Think well of me, whatever comes, but all that is over now.'

'Over? No, no; don't say that. Claire—my love!'

He still held her hands in his, and as their eyes met her lips quivered, and her sweet face was drawn with anguish. It was a hard fight, but she conquered, and tearing herself away, she crossed the stile, and he saw her with bent head hurrying towards her home.

'It is impossible—impossible,' he muttered, as he stood leaning against the stile. 'No; she may say that a thousand times, but I shall hold to my faith, and this affair will give me strength.'

He walked slowly homeward, dreaming for a time of Claire's anguished face, and then the sight of a uniform brought back the thought of the Major, and the punishment he had received.

'Will he resent it?' he asked himself.

The answer was awaiting him later on at home, where he encountered Cora Dean just going out for a drive.

The pony carriage was at the door, and there was nothing for it but to hand the ladies in, Mrs. Dean receiving the attention with a most ungracious look, while Cora smiled and looked flushed and pleased as she drove off, with Sir Harry Payne, in Colonel Mellersh's room, watching her with admiring eyes.

'Won't be long, you know. Very kind of you to see me

about it; as it's his father he lives with,' said Sir Harry. 'Handsome woman that, Colonel. Precious unfortunate, all this. I say, how lucky you were at the tables last night. Very handsome woman that. Ever act now, do you know?'

'Every day,' said Colonel Mellersh drily. 'Here, I'll ask Linnell to step in.'

## CHAPTER III.

### NO BETTER THAN A FIDDLER.

'But you can't fight a fellow like that, Rockley,' said Sir Harry, who had been summoned to his brother-officer's room.

'Not fight him? I'll fight him, and kill him.'

'But he's only a fiddler.'

'Enough of the gentleman for my purpose, I tell you,' roared Rockley fiercely. 'I'll kill him.'

'Nonsense, man alive. If you must meet, wing him, or pink him, or spoil the blackguard's good looks. You can't kill a man!'

'Can't kill a man!' said the Major, in a low hissing voice; 'can't kill a man!'

'I say, Rockley! Hang it all, don't look the diabolical like that: you give me the cold shivers. Why, I wouldn't be called out by you on any consideration.'

'Ha-ha-ha!' laughed Rockley, with a ghastly attempt at mirth. 'Did I look queer?'

'Queer? You looked queer multiplied ten thousand times.

Why, Rockley, one of you with a face like that would scare a regiment of French cuirassiers. I say, what was the row about—a woman?'

'Curse her!' cried Rockley, flashing out into uncontrolled rage again, as he writhed with mental and bodily pain. 'I'll bring her to her senses for this. Treat me as if I were some gawky boy, to be held off and coaxed on, and then bidden to keep my distance!

'What girl was it?'

'Curse you! don't ask questions.'

'Bah! What a fire-eater you are, Rockley. As if I did not know. So the fairy Clairy has been saying, "How dare you, sir?" Ha—ha—ha!'

'Do you want to quarrel, man?' said the Major, with an angry look in his eye.

'Not I, old lad; not with you in that temper. So she has been riding the high horse, and bidding you keep your distance; and, just in the nick of time, she had her dear friend Dick Linnell there, and the strong-armed fool horse-whipped you.'

Rockley turned upon him savagely, and gripped him by the arm so fiercely that Sir Harry Payne involuntarily shrank away.

'Don't!' cried the Major hoarsely. 'Don't! or I can't answer for myself.'

'Why, Rockley!'

'Don't speak to me. Man, I feel as if that Linnell had roused a devil in me, and till I see him on the turf helpless I shall know no rest. Were you ever beaten—cut—and wealed with your own whip?'

'Well, egad, not to put too fine a point on it, old lad, it was not with a whip; it was a walking cane.'

'And did it cut deep down into your very soul, and make you feel as if nothing but blood would heal the pain?'

'Well, egad, no. It hurt a good deal, but I was obliged to pocket it all. Lady's husband was a bit put out, you see. But that's a long time ago. And do you really mean to fight?'

'Fight? If I don't I shall lie in wait for the scoundrel and shoot him like a dog.'

'You couldn't do that, my dear Rockley. Behaviour unworthy of an officer and a gentleman.'

'And as for that woman,' continued Rockley, striding up and down the room as if he were some savage beast confined in a cage, 'my God! she shall smart for this!'

'My dear Rockley,' said Sir Harry, 'you went the wrong way to work.'

'Silence, idiot!' roared the Major fiercely. 'You would, of course, have won. She would have gone down on her knees to you. You are so handsome—so irresistible. Oh, damn it! No one could withstand you!'

'Sneer away, old fellow. I'm not going to boast,' said Sir Harry with a quiet, self-satisfied smile. 'I'm not the man to kiss and tell; but—never mind.'

'Go on and settle that at once. No shirking; no excuses, mind. He shall meet me, and then——'

'Then—poor devil!' murmured Sir Harry Payne, as he sauntered out of the room and away across the parade ground. 'What a temper he has! By George! if he were little May's husband I'm afraid I should be disposed to abdicate in favour of some one, who might flirt to his heart's content for me.

'Now what's to be done? Shall I tell the Colonel? No. Wouldn't do. The matter must go on. He'll be cooler when they meet, and it will only mean a wing or a leg. That's all.'

He went jauntily down to the parade, and exchanged pinches of snuff with old Lord Carboro', who looked after him and muttered, 'Fashionable fool! I wonder how much he owes Barclay. I must see. Clode tells me things are going too far, and I'm not going to have some one's fair fame smirched through that idiot. A few months in a debtor's prison would do him good.'

In happy ignorance of the remarks made behind his back, Sir Harry Payne went on to the house on the Parade, and Lord Carboro' trotted off, snuff-box in hand, slightly uneasy in mind, but at rest compared to what he would have been

had he known of the encounter that had taken place, and of Sir Harry Payne's mission.

Richard Linnell had not returned, so Sir Harry bethought himself of Colonel Mellersh, found him at home, began chatting with him concerning cards, and the company staying in the place, firmly resolved not to give the Colonel a hint about his mission—and in ten minutes he had told him all.

'Tut—tut—tut!' ejaculated the Colonel. 'I'm very sorry. About Claire Denville, you say?'

'Egad, Mellersh, what a fellow you are! You pump a man dry. Well, yes. Rockley's dead on her. You remember the serenade?'

'Ah, yes; that horrible night!'

'Well, he's a close fellow, as a rule, about his amours, but he raves about that girl.'

'Had she gone to meet him?'

'I don't know; suppose so. Then the other lover comes; and it's tom-cats.'

'They came to blows!'

'Blows?' said Sir Harry, bending forward and taking the Colonel by a button: 'as far as I can make out, Linnell took his riding-whip from him, and he is lashed from head to foot.'

'And all about that girl of Denville's,' said the Colonel, with a contemptuous look.

'Yes. But, my dear boy, you must own that she is devilishly handsome.'

'Oh yes, she's handsome enough. Then the affair is serious?'

'Serious?' said Sir Harry, lowering his voice. 'Rockley swears he'll kill him.'

Colonel Mellersh looked very grave.

'They'll have to meet, then?'

'Meet, my dear sir! Rockley says he'll lie in wait for him and shoot him like a dog if he doesn't come out. Fancy, you know, beaten like that before a lady!'

'And such a lady as Claire Denville,' said Colonel Mellersh, with a sneer. 'Well,' he added, changing his manner, 'I'm very sorry.'

'Yes, so am I. Rockley's deuced haughty, and bullying, and overbearing, particularly lately—things seem to have gone wrong with him—but he's not a bad fellow.'

'As men go,' said the Colonel with a sneer.

'Exactly—as men go,' replied Sir Harry, whose brains were not very analytical as regarded *double entendre*.

Just then Richard Linnell reached the door, encountered Cora Dean, and was finally beckoned into Colonel Mellersh's room.

'My dear Linnell,' said the Colonel gravely, as the others exchanged distant bows, 'Sir Harry Payne has called on behalf of Major Rockley—as his friend.'

He watched Linnell's face intently, but there was only a slight contraction of the brows.

'Bravo!' said the Colonel to himself. 'He's staunch.'

'Mellersh,' said Linnell gravely, 'I have no friend to whom I can appeal but you in a case like this.'

'I would far rather leave it,' said Colonel Mellersh slowly; 'but perhaps if you leave the affair in my hands, Sir Harry Payne and I may be able to arrange for a peaceful issue. Major Rockley may be ready to withdraw or apologize.'

'S'death, sir!' cried Sir Harry; 'apologize for being horsewhipped!'

'I beg pardon,' said the Colonel. 'You see, I am not properly acquainted with the matter.'

'There can be no apology, Colonel Mellersh,' said Linnell, with a grave dignity that made the Colonel's eyes light up. 'I leave myself in your hands, and I shall be most grateful.'

'But——'

'I need say no more,' said the young man. 'Of course, I know what Sir Harry Payne's visit means, and I am ready when and where you will.'

He bowed and left the room with all the formality of the time; and when, about a quarter of an hour later, Sir Harry Payne went away, the young officer uttered a contemptuous sneer.

''Pon my soul,' he muttered, 'it is horribly degrading for Rockley. The fellow really is no better than a fiddler after all.'

## CHAPTER IV.

### A LESSON IN PISTOL PRACTICE.

The reason for Sir Harry Payne's sneering remark was patent to Colonel Mellersh as soon as he opened the door, for from the Linnells' rooms came the sweet harmonies of a couple of exquisitely-played violins, and for a few minutes the Colonel seemed to forget the trouble on hand, as he stood with his face softened, and one delicate hand waving to the rhythm of the old Italian music.

'Poor lad!' he said, as his face changed, and a look of pain crossed his brow. 'And for her, too. Weak, foolish lad! He's infatuated—as we all are at some time or other in our lives.'

He stood in his doorway, thoughtful, and with brow knit.

'That chattering pie will spread it all over the town. Clode will get to know, and then—well, we must take care.'

He crossed the hall, tapped lightly on the opposite door, and then entered.

'Bravo—bravo!' he cried, clapping his delicate white hands. 'Admirable!'

'Ah, Mellersh, come and join us,' said the elder Linnell, raising his glasses on to his forehead. 'Just in time for a trio.'

'No, no, not to-day. Impossible. My head is terrible this morning. Late hours—cards—strong coffee. I came to ask Dick here if he would be my companion for a six-mile walk to Shankley Wood.'

The elder Linnell looked from one to the other with a smile.

'Oh, I'm sure he will,' he said. 'Eh, Dick?'

'Of course, father, of course.'

'And out all the morning, too! Well, well, fresh air for health.'

'Why don't you get more then, Linnell?'

'I—I?' said the grave, elderly man slowly. 'I don't know. I don't want fresh air. I'm very well as I am. I shall do for my time here.'

'Why, father,' said Richard merrily, as he clapped him on the shoulder, 'what a tone to take.'

He exchanged a quick, agonised glance with Mellersh, and then proceeded to replace his violin and bow in the case.

'Come to me, Dick,' said the Colonel; 'I want to go to my room:' and he went out, busied himself for a few minutes in his bedroom, and then came out again into the hall, to find Mrs. Dean disappearing up the staircase, and Cora giving some orders to her little groom.

He waited till she turned and came towards him with a scornful look in her eyes.

'Well,' he said, in a low voice, and with a longing underlook in his eyes that he evidently tried to conceal, 'how many poor fellows slain this morning?'

'How many are there here worth slaying?' she said, in the same low tone.

'A matter of taste,' he said, gravely. 'A matter of taste, Miss Cora Dean.'

'Not one,' she said, giving him her hand in response to his own held out.

'I don't know,' he said, looking very keenly in her eyes, 'anger—love—jealousy.'

She snatched her hand away.

'Don't fool!' she cried angrily. 'I? Jealous?'

'Yes, you—jealous,' he said; and then as she hurried up the stairs, 'and there would be another emotion to trouble you, Cora Dean, if you knew all that I know now. Ah, Dick! Ready?'

'Yes. Who was that, here?'

'Your fair enslaver—Cora Dean!'

Richard looked up at him keenly and laughed as they left the house, ignorant of the fact that Cora was watching them intently, and Mrs. Dean was keeping up a running fire of comment on what she called her 'gal's foolery.'

Mellersh led the way at a good brisk pace along the parade, and they had not gone far before they became aware of the tall figure of the Master of the Ceremonies showing

himself, as was his wont, king of the place apparently, and bowing and acknowledging bows.

Richard Linnell drew his breath with a slight hiss, but there was no avoiding the encounter, and as they drew near and raised their hats, there was a smile and most courteous bow for Colonel Mellersh, and the most distant of salutes for his companion.

'Old impostor,' said the Colonel, as they took the first turning and made for the country beyond the Downs.

'No,' said Richard Linnell gravely, 'I don't think him that. He is a gentleman at heart, fond of his children, and his ways are forced upon him by his position.'

'Fond of his children! Bah! As objects of merchandise. I tell you, Dick, I hate the man.'

'And when you hate a man you are unjust.'

'Not here. My dear Dick, you look at old Denville through rose-coloured glasses. Pah! I detest him, and, by Jove, sir, I don't acquit him of some knowledge of that terrible affair at his house.'

'Colonel Mellersh!'

'My dear boy!'

They walked on in silence for a few minutes, and then, clear now of the town, Colonel Mellersh exclaimed:

'My dear Dick, you have always known my feelings regarding this unfortunate attachment.'

'Yes,' said the young man sadly.

'She is very beautiful, but see how she has been brought up. Look at her sister—a weak, vain, foolish child more than a married woman, about whom there is bound to be some scandal soon.'

'Can the sister help that?'

'Look at the brother; that careless young ne'er-do-weel, who is to be trained up in his father's steps.'

'Poverty seems to be their greatest sin,' replied Richard quietly.

'Then, there is another son, who quarrelled with the father and went off and enlisted. My dear Dick, is such a family one that you ought to enter?'

'My dear Colonel,' said Richard with a sad smile, 'I do not seem likely to enter it. You saw the look old Denville gave me. But, for heaven's sake, don't throw out hints again about that murder.'

'Very well, but you must promise me that there shall be an end to all this infatuation. I speak as your father's oldest and dearest friend, and as one who feels as if he had a share in you—you reckless wild young scapegrace.'

'I can promise nothing,' said Richard coldly.

'Not now that you have been dragged into this serious affair?'

'Miss Denville has dragged me into no serious affair. Her conduct to me has always been that of a refined and modest lady.'

'My dear boy! Have you forgotten that this has been going on between her and Rockley for months?'

'There is nothing between Major Rockley and Miss Denville,' said Richard hoarsely; and his cheeks began to burn and his eyes to flash.

'Dick! Have you forgotten the serenade that night?'

'Have I forgotten it!' cried Richard fiercely.

'Well, what does that show?'

'That this scoundrel—this *roué*—this libertine—dared to cast his vile eyes on as sweet and pure a girl as ever breathed. Look here, Colonel Mellersh—no, no—my dear old friend—I found that dog insulting Miss Denville.'

'Where?'

'Away there, beyond the Downs, out past the fishermen's cottages.'

'How came Claire Denville out there alone with one of the wildest officers at the barracks?'

'Heaven knows,' cried Richard. 'I tell you I found him grossly insulting her, and I took the dog's whip from him, and thrashed him till my arm ached.'

'And the lady flung herself into your arms, called you her gallant, her brave preserver, and you embraced and swore fidelity, while the wicked villain, the dog that you had thrashed, sneaked off snarling, with his tail between his legs.'

Richard turned upon him fiercely, but he checked his anger as he met the Colonel's mocking eyes.

'You do not know Claire Denville,' he said coldly.

'But, Dick, lad, come—there was the embracing and thanks?'

'Miss Denville is a sweet, true lady,' said Richard, 'whom I fear I may never win.'

'Never win!' said the Colonel mockingly. 'Dick, Dick, what a child you are! I used, a year or two back, to be glad you were so different to the other men here; but now I almost regret that you have not led a faster life. You are such an innocent boy.'

'Shall we turn back?' said Richard abruptly.

'Turn back, man, no. We have not said a word yet about your meeting. Don't be angry with me, lad. Believe me, I am one of your truest friends.'

'I know it,' cried Richard warmly; 'but don't talk of my love affair. We shall never agree till the scales of prejudice have dropped from your eyes.'

'Till the scales of a boyish folly have dropped from yours, Dick. Well, we shall be in accord some day. If I'm wrong I'll humbly ask your pardon.'

'And if I'm wrong I will yours,' cried Richard. 'Now, then, what of Payne's visit?'

'You will have to meet the Major,' said the Colonel gravely.

'Yes, I suppose so. He could not forgive such an insult as that.'

'You treat it very lightly, Dick. The consequences may be very grave.'

'I hope not,' said Richard. 'I am not a soldier, but I am not going to show the white feather, even if I wear it in my heart.'

'Not you,' said the Colonel, as he tapped his companion on the shoulder. 'But I should have liked you to be fighting on account of some other lady.'

'And I should not,' cried Richard. 'Is this likely to be serious?'

'I should be no true friend to you, my lad, if I concealed the truth from you. It may be very serious.'

'For me?'

'I don't say that.'

'But I never fired a pistol in my life, and I fence horribly.'

'It will be pistols, Dick. I arranged that it should be. But you will be cool?'

'I hope I shall be just as I am now,' said Richard calmly.

The Colonel looked at him intently, but no nerve showed a tremor.

'A good walk will do you good,' he said, and after telling him the preliminaries, and the place where they were to meet, the conversation was changed and they walked slowly on till the edge of the Downs was reached, and they soon after entered an extensive wood, walking down a leafy glade where all seemed wonderfully peaceful, and its solemnity

was so soothing to Richard Linnell that he was about to throw himself upon the turf when Colonel Mellersh stopped short, and pointing to a gnarled beech of stunted growth, exclaimed:

'That will do exactly.'

'Do?' said Linnell. 'Do for what?'

'Why, my dear boy, do you suppose I have brought you out here for nothing? No; since the abominable code for furbishing up injured honour exists, and a man may be called out, it is our duty to prepare for emergencies. You cannot use a pistol?'

'No,' said Richard, shaking his head.

'I can. I have been out six times, and I'm going to show you how to hit your man and save yourself.'

'I don't want to hit Major Rockley.'

'But I want you to hit him and save yourself. My dear boy, you are worth five thousand Major Rockleys to your father, and we must not have you hurt.'

As he spoke, to Richard's great surprise, he took out a brace of duelling pistols with flask and bullets, and after loading skilfully he took a few cards from his breast, and going to the stunted tree, tacked one on each of two boughs about on a level with a man's outstretched arms, another on the trunk, and another higher still, where the head would be.

'I used to practise with the pistol a great deal at one

time, Dick, and I could hit either of those address cards as many times as I liked.'

'Then I will not quarrel with you and call you out.'

'Don't,' said the Colonel, handing him a pistol, and proceeding to step out fifteen paces. 'There,' he said, 'stand there and aim at that card on the trunk. That is where a man's heart would be. I will count slowly, and when I come to three, raise your pistol quickly and fire.'

'One—two—*three!*'

Richard Linnell raised his pistol, and drew the trigger, but there was no report.

'It will not go off,' he said.

'No,' replied the Colonel; 'pistols never will, unless you cock them.'

'Pish!' ejaculated Richard, repairing the omission. 'Again.'

The Colonel counted once more; there was a flash, a sharp report, and a leaf or two fell from high up a tree to the right of the target.

'Take the other,' said the Colonel quietly; 'hold it a little more firmly, and raise it slowly. The moment your eye glances straight along the barrel, press the trigger softly, so as not to jerk the pistol. Ready? Now—one—two—*three!*'

There was another sharp report, and the Colonel smiled.

'That's better,' he said. 'Your first bullet went over the

enemy's head twenty feet or so. That one would have him in the shoulder. Try again.'

The Colonel busied himself loading the pistols with all the quickness of an adept as his pupil fired, keeping him at it for quite a couple of hours, with intervals of rest. Now he made him fire at one card, then at another, practising as at his adversary's arms, head, and body, till Richard looked at him wearily.

'Yes; that will do now,' said Colonel Mellersh. 'You may congratulate yourself, Dick, upon being a horribly bad shot; but you will be able to handle your pistol properly, and raise it like a man who is used to the weapon.'

'What is the use of that,' said Richard, smiling, 'if I cannot aim straight?'

'A great deal. If you had taken hold of your pistol in a bungling way to-morrow, Rockley would have felt that he had you at his mercy, and he would have been as cool as a fish. Now he will see that you know what a pistol is, and be perfectly ignorant of the fact that you are unskilful of aim. He will think he has a dangerous adversary before him, and be more likely nervous than cool.'

'I see,' said Richard, with his eyes lighting up. 'I've had my turn at the scoundrel, and I'm satisfied. Of course I don't want to hit him, but at the same time I don't want him to hit me.'

'Oh!' said the Colonel drily, 'I thought you did.'

'What! want him to hit me! Why?'

'You seemed so cool over it.'

'Oh, but I'm not,' said Richard gravely. 'I suppose a good shot would hit one of those cards?'

'Time was, Dick, when I could have put half a dozen shots in either of them. I don't know that I could hit one now.'

He raised the pistol he had been loading as he spoke, took a quick aim, and hit the centre card just on the edge, driving it into the bark of the tree.

'Bad!' he said. 'Let's try another.'

He aimed at the card representing the enemy's right arm. fired, and struck it also about a quarter of an inch from the edge.

'Out of practice, Dick,' he said, thrusting the pistols into their dark cloth bags, and replacing them in his pocket. 'There, my lad, let's get home. Dine lightly this evening, go to bed in good time, and have a long night's rest.'

'When is the meeting?' said Richard calmly.

'At six to-morrow morning.'

'Where did you say?'

'On the sands, two miles out below the east cliff.'

'Why there?'

'We shall want an excuse for going out so early, my lad. We can be going to bathe, and so be unnoticed, and there will be no fear of an interruption,' said the Colonel grimly. 'This is to be no play affair, Dick. An officer in His

Majesty's service cannot submit to a horse-whipping from a civilian without trying to get ample satisfaction.'

He looked at Richard with a grave air of pity in his countenance.

'Did you ever shoot a man?' said Richard, as they were walking briskly back.

'Do you mean wounded or killed?'

'The latter.'

'Once, Dick.'

The young man's countenance contracted, and he looked at his companion almost in horror.

'Yes,' said the Colonel; 'it is horrible, Dick, and the remembrance that the man was an utter scoundrel does not make the fact much less horrible after all these years.'

They walked on for some distance in silence, before Richard Linnell broke in upon his companion's reverie.

'Was the duel about—a lady?'

The Colonel uttered a harsh laugh.

'It's an arrangement of nature, my dear Ulysses,' he said. 'If you see a couple of stags smashing their antlers, a couple of bulls goring each other, or two rams battering one another's heads, a brace of pheasants or barn-door cocks pecking and spurring each other to death, what's it about? A lady. The same with mankind, Dick; a duel is almost invariably more or less directly about a lady.'

Richard Linnell went on thoughtfully for a time, and then turned with a sad smile to the Colonel.

'So even you had to do battle once in such a cause?'

'Not exactly, Dick; it was upon another's behalf. An utter scoundrel, just such a fellow as Rockley, did my best friend a mortal wrong. One day, Dick, it was a happy, peaceful home that I used to visit, where as sweet-natured, true, and gentle a man as ever breathed lived in happy trust and faith in his sweet young wife; the next there was a stain—an indelible stain—upon that hearth-stone, and my poor friend lay stricken down by the shock, and nearly died of the brain fever that ensued.'

Richard Linnell looked at him with a curious feeling of horror—he knew not why—troubling his breast.

'Do you want to know any more?' said the Colonel roughly.

'Yes; go on.'

'I did not see either of them for two years: the young wife or the scoundrel I had introduced to the house as my friend. Then I had a letter from the lady—a piteous, appealing letter to me to help her. She told me she was starving in London, Dick, and that the villain who had won her into leaving her home had forsaken her at the end of six months, and that, since then, she had been striving to get a living by teaching, but that now she was prostrate on a sick bed, helpless and alone.'

There was a few moments' pause, and then the Colonel went on :

'I went to see her, Dick — poor, little, weak woman. Her good looks were gone, and she lay sick unto death for want of medical help and ordinary nutriment.'

The Colonel stopped again, for his mouth seemed dry, and he passed his tongue over his fevered lips before he went on.

'I did what was necessary, and went straight to the man who had done all this wrong. I told him everything, and that it was his duty to make some reparation at least by providing for the lady's needs, and ensuring that she should not want in the future.'

'Well?' said Richard hoarsely.

'He laughed at me. He refused so utterly that I lost my temper and called him villain and scoundrel. He retorted by insulting me with a vile charge as to the cause of my taking an interest in that poor woman, and he struck me, and then——'

'Well,' said Richard, 'and then?'

'I horsewhipped him, Dick, as you horsewhipped that man.'

'And he challenged you, and you fought, and——'

'Yes, heaven forgive me,' said Mellersh in a low voice, 'I shot him dead!'

'You did this for the woman you did not love,' said Richard Linnell, as if speaking to himself.

'Yes, for the woman I did not love.'

'What I did was for the woman I love with all my heart.

## CHAPTER V.

### A RETIRED SPOT FOR—A BATHE.

It was a cold grey morning as Colonel Mellersh and Richard Linnell went out on to the parade, quite unaware that a pair of dark eyes were watching from behind an upper blind; but the fact that each man carried a towel in his hand disarmed suspicion, and the owner of the eyes went back to the couch in her room as the gentlemen passed out of sight.

'I was afraid,' she said to herself softly. 'Perhaps there was no truth in it after all.'

Meanwhile, the Colonel and Richard Linnell went briskly on past the pier, with no one yet astir upon the parade; but farther on there were boats putting out to sea, and fishermen carrying oars and baskets down to those lying on the shingle.

As they went on along the cliff, Fisherman Dick was down by his upturned boat, trying the pitch, to find out whether it was hardened, and hearing the voices, he looked up and saw the two men pass.

'Master Richard Linnell—the Colonel,' he said to himself. 'Bathing, eh? Well, it's lonesome enough out there.'

The mist hung over the sea, and the waves came in with a mournful sound upon the shore, the pebbles rattling together as they were driven up and rolled back with the retiring waters, sounding in the distance as if they were whispering together about the meeting that was about to take place a mile or so onward, beyond the chalk bluff, where the land trended inward, and formed a little bay.

Fisherman Dick found the bottom of his boat rather sticky, but he did not seem to be thinking about it, but to be putting that and that together.

'Master Richard Linnell give that Major Rockley an out and out good welting yonder in the cornfield, and if he'd been with him instead of that tother one, I should say there was going to be a fight with pistols; but I suppose it means a bit of a swim, and——'

Dick Miggles bent down over his boat, and seemed to be paying not the least heed, for just then he saw four people coming down the cliff path on to the beach, and as they passed he saw that they were Rockley, Sir Harry Payne, a gentleman he did not know, and the Major's dragoon servant, James Bell, carrying something under his military cloak.

'It's a fight,' said Dick Miggles, as they passed him, picking their way down over the shingle to the firmer

ground, close to the water's edge, where there were long stretches of sand, and it was better walking.

'Now, what shall I do?' said Fisherman Dick; 'go and tell the constables? They'd be abed, and it would take me an hour to get back with them, and the mischief would be done before then. Anyhow, I'll go and see what's going on.'

By this time Mellersh and Linnell had passed out of sight along the shore, and the second party were a hundred yards away.

Fisherman Dick did not hesitate, but, going back up the cliff path, he reached the top, and walked swiftly along eastward for some distance. Then, throwing himself down, he crawled flat on the ground, taking off his hat and leaving it behind him.

In a few seconds he was at the edge of the cliff, where the soft shore turf ended, and the chalk was broken away, going sheer down perpendicularly to the shingle beach and rough rock débris that had fallen from time to time after undermining by the sea. As he expected, the two little parties were below.

'They're going to fight, sure enough,' muttered the fisherman. 'I may as well go and see fair. Where'll they do it?'

He lay still for a few moments thinking.

'Why, they'll make for the sand patch in Jollick's Cove,' he said aloud. 'Don't know much about it, or they'd have

took the path and the short cut and gone down the chalk steps.'

He smiled as some thought occurred to him, and, drawing back from the edge of the cliff, he crawled back to where the beaten path showed faintly, and where at intervals the turf had been cut away down to the chalk, and a white patch made, as a guide for travellers in the dark, lest they should stray from the slight sheep-track and go over the cliff to certain death.

Along this path Fisherman Dick ran at a brisk trot for quite a mile, while the cliff rose slightly into a bold bluff, but the fisherman did not climb this, but plunged down suddenly behind a clump of furze into a ravine where a slight path showed that there was a way to the shore.

He went down this a few yards, and then turned, took two great strides, climbed up the face of the ravine a little way, stepped behind a huge mass of chalk, went in and out among some débris from the cliff, and then stepped into what looked like a rain gully which led to an opening in the rock, forming a rough half hole, half cavern, with the light coming from the side through a large irregular opening, partly natural, partly reduced by the arrangement of blocks of chalk, so that there was plenty of room for a dozen men to be in shelter, and where, unseen, they had full view of the open sea for miles on either side, and of the smooth patch of sand in the little cove, fifty feet or so below.

'There, as long as they don't shute up this way,' said the fisherman, 'I shall be all right and can see them all. I hope young Linnell won't be hurt. Don't suppose he will, for pistols is mortal stupid tools to work with.'

Linnell and Mellersh came into sight soon after, and paused on reaching the sandy cove, a place admirably suited for the purpose in hand, for though from the rough look-out above, the shore could be commanded for some distance either way, those who occupied the sandy patch were hidden from either east or west.

'I'd have given something to have prevented this, Dick,' said Mellersh huskily; 'but you were bound to meet him.'

'Yes,' said Richard gravely. 'It was unavoidable. Hush! don't talk to me. I'm firm now, and'—he smiled as he spoke—'I want to do you justice.'

'Well,' said Sir Harry Payne, in a low voice, as the second party came upon the ground, 'how do you feel now, Rockley? What do you mean to do?'

'To the man who struck me, and came between me and Claire Denville?'

'Yes.'

'I shall shoot him like a dog.'

## CHAPTER VI.

### JAMES BELL IS CONFIDENTIAL.

Sir Harry Payne looked at the stony face before him, and read fierce, implacable determination written plainly there. He felt that his companion was a soldier who would face death without a moment's hesitation, and that there was not a tremor in any pulse.

He had but little time for thought, for there were salutations to make, everything being carried out in the most cold-blooded style; after which Sir Harry took an oblong box from the Major's servant.

'You can go now,' he said.

'Not stay with my master, sir?'

'I said go, fellow,' cried Sir Harry sharply; and, in spite of his jaunty manner, he looked cold and pale.

'Back, Sir Harry?'

'No — anywhere. There, up the cliff. Be within call.'

The man saluted, turned on his heel, and, walking to

where a roughly-cut path of steps led up the cliff into the little ravine, began to mount as quickly as he could.

About half-way up he turned, saw that he was out of sight, and then, following Fisherman Dick's steps as if he were familiar with the way, climbed right into the rough cavern, and came suddenly upon the man, who started round in surprise.

'Hullo!' he growled. 'What are you doing here?'

'Same to you,' said the young dragoon, in a low voice. 'What are you going to do?'

'See the fight, if you must know,' said Fisherman Dick. 'Like my place, p'raps.'

'Yes,' said the young soldier quickly, 'I should;' and, stepping forward, he looked down cautiously on the group below.

'Why, it's Fred Denville, sure*ly*,' cried Fisherman Dick.

'Hush, man!' said the young soldier, catching him by the arm; 'James Bell now. Not a word to a soul about me.'

'What, not to your young brother, Master Fred?'

'Hist! I'm only a common soldier now, Dick. You won't betray me, I know.'

'Not I, lad. Troost me.'

'I will, Dick, with my name, and——'

He placed his lips close to the fisherman's ear, and whispered.

Fisherman Dick brought a broad hand down softly on his

knee, and laughed a silent laugh. But the next moment he turned preternaturally solemn, and whispered :

'It wouldn't be fair.'

'Fair!' whispered back Fred: 'is it fair for that poor fellow to stand and be shot down by a man who can snuff a candle at a dozen paces? I've seen him do it.'

'I've done, my lad, and you're safe with me. I'm close, as you used to know.'

Meanwhile the preparations had been going on below, and were so far advanced that the preliminaries had been all settled, the pistols charged, the ground stepped out, and the men were standing back to back, twelve paces apart.

Rockley was deadly pale, but not with the pallor of fear, as he stood exactly below the hollow where the two men were looking down. There was a savage look of rage in his eyes, and his lip was white where he pressed his teeth upon it firmly, longing the while to receive the weapon that was to be the minister of his vengeance upon the man he hated with an intense and ardent hate.

The doctor had drawn aside, walking down towards the sea, and the two seconds were together, every step in the progress of the drama being taken with a cold formality that was awful.

At last the seconds parted, each bearing one of the loaded weapons, and walking firmly towards his principal.

'Here you are, Rockley,' said Sir Harry, in a voice that

was husky, and not quite firm. 'You'll wing him, won't you, or give him a ball through one of his legs?'

'If I can shoot straight,' said Rockley coldly—'and my arm is pretty firm this morning—there shall be a funeral in Saltinville next Sunday.'

'No, no. Gad, man, don't do that. Think of yourself if you killed him.'

'I could get over it,' was the reply. 'The Prince would help me; and if he wouldn't—curse that Linnell, I'd sacrifice anything to pay him back his debt.'

'Yes, you're firm enough, Dick. Mind: as Payne gives the word, raise your pistol and fire at once. You will not hit him, but the quick flash will spoil his aim. I will not consent to another shot. If he wants another it shall be at me. Now then; you understand?'

'Yes,' said Linnell firmly, 'I understand, Mellersh. I shall not fire at him. If I fall—badly hit—tell Claire Denville I sent her my dear love.'

'Be firm, man. You will not fall,' said the Colonel, pressing his hand. Then, glancing at Sir Harry Payne, who was waiting, he walked away towards a certain prearranged point, where he and Sir Harry stood together in the grey morning light; while, back to back, there were the principals, each grasping his heavy duelling pistol, with the chalk cliff towering above, and, fifty yards away, the waves uttering their low, whispering sound.

Just then a couple of gulls floated by, grey and ghostly in the dull mist, uttering their faint and peevish cry, and a few drops of rain began to fall.

'Are you ready, gentlemen?' said Sir Harry Payne hoarsely.

No one spoke, but the principals bowed their heads.

'When I say "three," said Sir Harry, 'you will turn round and fire. *One—two*—THREE!'

As the last word left Sir Harry Payne's lips, the principals turned quickly round, and almost simultaneously came two sharp echoing reports following the faint puffs of smoke that shrouded the duellists for the moment.

Then, as the seconds were starting forward, Mellersh saw that Rockley was looking up at the face of the cliff. Then he looked down at Richard Linnell, who, as the shots were fired, twisted himself sharply round, dropping his pistol, and now stood with one hand pressed to his temple.

Mellersh saw a curious smile on Rockley's face, and a hoarse gasp came from his throat.

'It is my fate to shoot another man—dead!' he muttered; and he was just in time to catch Richard Linnell as he reeled and was about to fall.

The doctor was coming up quickly, and Sir Harry had run to his principal.

'You've killed him,' he whispered.

'I hope so,' was the cool reply. 'I'm not sure, though. That cursed piece of chalk fell from the cliff as I fired, and spoiled my aim. Go and see where he is hurt.'

As Sir Harry ran off, Rockley stooped and picked up a piece of chalk rock as big as his fist, and then threw it down, dusting his hand afterwards, and then removing the mark of the chalk where it had struck him upon his right shoulder.

'Pah!' he exclaimed, pressing his handkerchief to his lip, which was cut; 'the thing bounced up. I hope it has not saved Mr. Richard Linnell's life.'

Judging from appearances it had not, for Richard Linnell lay upon the sand with his eyes half closed, and the blood trickling from a wound over the right temple, just where the hair began to grow.

'Is he much hurt?' whispered Sir Harry.

'Don't know yet,' said the doctor sharply, as he examined the fallen man. 'Not Rockley's fault if he is not.'

'He's a perfect devil,' muttered Sir Harry, as, looking very white, he gazed from one to the other, while the Major slowly walked down towards the sea and back.

'Well?' said Colonel Mellersh, as the doctor ceased his examination.

'Had my man better be off at once?' said Sir Harry. 'Give him a chance to get away.'

'If you do get him away, Sir Harry Payne, let me know

where he is gone. I may have a few words to say to Major Rockley.'

'I can't tell what may supervene. There may be concussion of the brain,' said the surgeon. 'Yes, he is coming to now. The bullet has only scored his head. It was a marvellous escape.'

'——!' muttered Major Rockley, as the news was conveyed to him. 'Here, let's be off back, I want my breakfast. Curse him, I've not done with him yet, Payne. There are other ways to touch the heart of a greenhorn like that, than with bullets. I'd got him dead as a hammer. My arm felt like steel, and my shot would have had him right in the chest if that piece of chalk had not struck me and jerked my arm. Come along.'

'Hadn't I better go and see if I can be of any help?'

'Hadn't you better go and nurse the scoundrel, and read to him a bit? Bah! Come along, man. He has his second, and they can fetch help from the fishermen's cottages if they want it.'

Sir Harry followed him up the cliff steps and along the Down path without a word.

'So, I shall not want a post-chaise,' said Rockley, with a laugh. 'No rushing up to town and hiding for awhile in chambers in St. James's, or running over to Boulogne. Good job, too. Save the money. I'm fearfully short. Why, man, you look white.'

'Do I? It's cold. I'm glad that the affair has terminated so well.'

'Terminated?' cried the Major, grasping him by the arm, 'It has only begun. I tell you there are other ways than bullets to touch a man's heart, and I'll pierce his, curse him! so that he shall rue the day he ever crossed my path.'

Sir Harry looked at him uneasily.

'Payne,' he continued, 'I'm a firm friend to those who help me—and lend me money,' he added, with a laugh—'but I never forgive an insult, or a woman's slight.'

Down on the beach, Colonel Mellersh was kneeling with the great drops of perspiration standing on his face, holding Richard Linnell's hand, while the surgeon was looking on anxiously at the returning signs of knowledge of his position on his patient's part.

The other principal and second had been gone some minutes when footsteps were heard, and James Bell and Fisherman Dick came quickly down the cliff.

'Is he much hurt, sir?' said the former, with real signs of trouble in his face.

'No, my man: you may tell the Major that it was a narrow escape.'

'Poor lad!' muttered the soldier, going down on one knee, and making Colonel Mellersh look at him with surprise, as he took one cold hand, to hold it between his own for a few moments.

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'Can we carry him to my house, gen'lemen,' said Fisherman Dick roughly. 'Taint very far.'

'No, my man, no,' said the doctor; 'he has only been stunned. Narrow escape, though. He'll walk home.'

'Do you mean it, sir?' cried James Bell. 'Beg pardon, sir. Only glad the Major won't have to go. I'll get back to barracks now. He'll be wanting me.'

'All right, my man. Take those confounded pistols with you. There: be off.'

The soldier placed the pistols in the case, and, saluting both gentlemen, hurried away by the shore, while Fisherman Dick touched his hat again, and said in a whisper:

'I've got a drop of right Nantes sperrit at my cottage, gentlemen, if you can bring him in there.'

'No, no,' said the doctor. 'There, he's coming round fast now,' and he pointed to Linnell's staring eyes.

The doctor was right. Half an hour later, with no worse trouble to combat than a fierce headache, and the wound smarting under its strapping, Richard Linnell was able to take the Colonel's arm and walk home, a warning to other young men not to attempt to climb up the cliff to the Downs, and risk falling and cutting their heads!

For that was the version of Richard Linnell's mishap that ran through the town.

## CHAPTER VII.

### MISS CLODE IS OVERCOME.

It was a vain effort, for such an event was sure to be known to others besides the parties concerned.

Sent on a special mission by her aunt that morning, to see whether Mr. Miggles had any fish, and with a basket to obtain a small bottle of a peculiar water that Fisherman Dick secretly supplied to a few friends whom he could trust, simple-faced Annie picked up some news.

'You don't want any more brandy, aunty,' the girl had said; 'there are two bottles not opened, and you said you wouldn't have any more fish for ever so long.'

'Oh, Annie!' cried Miss Clode, 'I thought you were beginning to be of a little use to me.'

The girl's mouth opened wide, and her nose turned red; but directly after a cunning smile came in her face, and her eyes nearly closed.

'Oh, I say, aunty,' she said softly, 'I know what you mean now. You mean go and make that an excuse for

getting to know about pretty Miss Denville going to see about the little girl.'

'Worse and worse, Annie,' cried Miss Clode. 'Don't you understand that a still tongue makes a wise head?'

'Oh, yes, aunty, I know now;' and nodding her head very knowingly, Annie went off on her mission.

She returned very quickly, with a face quite scarlet with heat and excitement, full of the news she had picked up from Mrs. Miggles, who had determined not to say a word of what she knew, and ended by telling all.

Miss Clode was in a state of excitement, for she had heard from a customer that young Mr. Linnell, of the Parade, had fallen from the cliff that morning and cut his head, and the news turned the little woman pale, and she staggered and felt sick. When Annie came back she had recovered, but only ready on hearing her niece's news to faint dead away and lie insensible, just as stout Mrs. Barclay came in about a new account-book, and to purchase a couple of pounds' worth of bill-stamps.

'Poor little woman!' cried Mrs. Barclay sympathetically. 'Here, don't make a fuss, my dear; I'll help you. Let's get her on the sofa. It's only fainting, and the smelling-salts will bring her round. That's the way,' she panted and puffed as she helped to carry the slight little woman into the inner room. 'Worse disasters at sea. Not so bad as Mr. Linnell tumbling off the cliff this morning and cutting his head.'

'He didn't tumble off the cliff,' said Annie, round-eyed and trembling with eagerness, as she whispered in Mrs. Barclay's ear.

'Oh, yes, he did, my dear.'

'No, he didn't,' whispered Annie, as Miss Clode lay quite senseless. 'Hearing about it all upset aunty.'

'Did it? What, his fall?'

'No, no, it wasn't a fall; but I mustn't say anything.'

'You don't know anything,' said Mrs. Barclay contemptuously.

'Oh yes, I do,' whispered Annie. 'It's very horrid. Major Rockley shot him in a duel this morning for horsewhipping him after Major Rockley had insulted Miss Denville. There!'

'Hush!' whispered Mrs. Barclay, whose face was now as red as Annie's. 'Your aunt is coming to.'

'Don't say I told you. She would be so cross.'

Mrs. Barclay nodded; and, after saying a few comforting words to the sufferer as she came to, contented herself with buying the bill-stamps, and left the shop, while, as soon as she had recovered sufficiently, Miss Clode wrote a few hasty lines to Colonel Mellersh, and strictly enjoining her to hold her tongue, sent her niece off to deliver the note on the Parade.

Colonel Mellersh was not within, but Cora Dean and her mother were alighting from the pony-carriage, and Annie

greeted them with a smile and a curtsey, which made Mrs. Dean tap the girl on the shoulder with a formidable fan.

'Here, you come in, and walk upstairs. I want a word with you.'

'No, no, not now, mother,' said Cora hastily.

'Now, just you let me have my own way for once in my life, please, Betsy,' said Mrs. Dean; and to avoid having words in the hall, where they could easily be overheard, Cora gave way, and in due time, to her intense delight, Annie was seated in one of Josiah Barclay's gilded easy-chairs, with a piece of cake in her hand, and a glass of ginger wine before her.

'Which is quite good enough for her,' Mrs. Dean had said to herself.

Cora had not taken off her things, but had gone to the window, to stand looking out, and biting her lips with shame and rage, as she heard her mother's words to the girl.

'Trust me, ma'am?' Annie said, with her mouth half full of sweet Madeira cake, 'that you may, ma'am, as much as you would aunty. Oh, yes, I'm sure aunty gave his lordship the notes, and he only laughed.'

Cora's beautiful white teeth gritted together as, ill-bred as she was, she knew well enough that had she wished Lord Carboro's openly-manifested admiration to ripen to her profit, her mother's open invitations to him to call would have destroyed her chance.

Then she tried to shut her ears to what was going on, and stood there wondering whether Richard Linnell would go out while she stood there—why it was the house had been so quiet that morning, for she generally listened for an hour to him playing duets with his father.

Then she wondered rather bitterly whether he would ever care for her, and his coldly polite way be changed. He was always civil and pleasant, and chatted with her when they met, but that was all, and at times it mortified her, as she thought how beautiful she was, making her vow that she would be revenged upon him, while at other times all this made her sit down and sob by the hour together.

'Why should I trouble about him?' she was asking herself just then, as she gazed from the window, and ignored the low buzzing of Annie's voice, which came huskily through Madeira cake, 'I, who might accept almost any man I like. I've good looks, and money, and there are hundreds of men who would be only too glad of a smile. As for——'

'Mr. Linnell, ma'am? Oh, yes, it's quite true,' Annie was whispering, and the name sent a thrill through Cora.

'But he lives downstairs, girl, and we should have known.'

'Oh, yes, ma'am, I learn by heart—aunty makes me—where all the fashionable people live. I know Mr. Linnell—two Mr. Linnells—live downstairs. It's in our visitor's list, along with you, and Colonel Mellersh, and it's quite true.'

What was quite true about Richard Linnell? If it was about Claire Denville, she would tear him from her; she would crush her. How dare she presume to think of her idol—the true, brave fellow who had dashed into the sea and saved her when she was drowning?

Poor Fisherman Dick, like many more, not being young and handsome, was forgotten after that ten-pound note.

Cora's eyes flashed, her cheeks burned, and she looked as beautiful as an artist's idea of Juno, listening now with all the concentration of her passionate nature.

'I oughtn't to talk about it, ma'am, and I wouldn't tell anyone but you,' Annie went on. 'They said he fell over the cliff this morning and cut his head.'

Cora Dean saw blood upon a white forehead, and she clutched the back of a chair, for the room seemed to be turning, and she felt sick.

'But he didn't, ma'am.'

'Isn't he hurt, then?'

'Yes, ma'am, badly. I wonder you didn't know. You see, he met Major Rockley—you know him, ma'am?—handsome dark gentleman with mustachios.'

'Yes, yes, I know,' said Mrs. Dean, revelling in the bit of gossip. 'Have some more cake.'

'Thank you, ma'am. Major Rockley was out walking with Miss Claire Denville out on the Downs——'

Cora's faintness passed away, and the room ceased to

glide round as her eyes brightened, and she felt as if she could have embraced that handsome *roué*, who always bowed to her with such a look of insolent contempt.

'And then Mr. Linnell came up and took Major Rockley's whip away and beat him.'

Cora's cheeks burned with jealous rage now. How dare Richard Linnell do that? And yet she liked him for it. He was so brave. But for Claire Denville! Her eyes flashed again.

'Then they met this morning, ma'am, down on the sands, and fought a real duel, and Major Rockley shot Mr. Linnell.'

'It is not true!' cried Cora excitedly, and once more the room began to turn.

'Yes, ma'am, it's quite true,' said Annie, with her mouth now full of cake.

Shot!—injured by Major Rockley! and she—she could not go down to him to wait upon him, and show him by her every act how she loved him.

A minute before she had been ready to bless Major Rockley. Now, curses were in her heart, as she thought of him raising his hand against Richard Linnell to strike him down.

'No, ma'am, he isn't very bad,' Annie went on, in answer to a question of Mrs. Dean.

'It can't be true,' Cora said to herself, as her brain seemed to become a chaos of love, jealousy, hatred, and pride in the

brave young fellow who had saved her life, and, civilian though he was, showed himself ready to meet such a notorious fire-eater as the Major.

Just then she gave a gasp, for she saw a stiff, military-looking man, whom she knew to be the regimental surgeon, come up to the door.

It was true, then; and it was all she could do to keep from bursting into an hysterical fit of sobbing.

But a thought came directly that gave her strength, and she felt joy and elation together as she said to herself:

'He found them together, and horsewhipped the Major. Well, so much the better. He can never think of Claire Denville again. If he did——'

She uttered a low unpleasant laugh, as Annie found that she must go back, for she could eat no more cake; and as soon as they were alone Mrs. Dean exclaimed:

'Don't, for goodness' sake, laugh like that, my dear; it gives me the cold shivers all down my back. It's just like Metalina in "The Haunted Vampire," where she takes an oath as she'll kill her rival or perish in the attempt.'

## CHAPTER VIII.

### MRS. BARCLAY IS PUZZLED.

'Oh, my dear, and do you know how they're all a-talking about you?' cried Mrs. Barclay, as she sat panting beneath the florid portrait of May Burnett in the M.C.'s shabby drawing-room.

Claire looked up appealingly in the pleasant, plump face, and her brow knit.

'You see, it all comes to me, my dear, and it worries me because I like you so.'

'You were always very kind to me, Mrs. Barclay.'

'Not half so kind as I should like to be, my dear. I wanted to have you home when the mur——'

'Oh, hush!'

'Of course, my dear. That's my way. So vulgar and thoughtless. Think of me now bringing that up to you who live here; and us sitting in the very next room.'

'Mrs. Barclay!'

'Yes, I won't say another word, my dear. Not that I be-

lieve in sperrits or anything of that kind. But you were saying about me being kind. Why, you won't let me be, my dear. I'm sure the dresses I'd buy you, and the things I'd give you, if you'd let me, would make some of them stare.'

'But I could not let you, Mrs. Barclay,' said Claire, smiling.

'No; you're so proud, my dear, that's it. You see, Josiah lets me have so much for housekeeping, that I've always plenty to spare; and as to jewellery, why, I might wash in diamonds if I liked, but I don't.'

'Let us be as usual, Mrs. Barclay,' said Claire, with more animation, 'and never mind about what people say, or fashion, or dress, or any of the nonsense.'

'I'm sure I should like to be, my dear; but you being a motherless girl, I don't like to hear people talking about you.'

Claire's face grew flushed.

'Don't look like that, Claire, my dear. I'm not cross with you, but when people talk about you being out walking with that horrid black Major Rockley, it hurts me.'

'I could not help it, Mrs. Barclay,' said Claire.

'Then it's all true, then, about young Mr. Linnell horse-whipping him?'

'Yes, yes; but this is so cruel to me. He did beat him for insulting me.'

'Bless him then. I always liked him, my dear. How he must love you!'

'Oh, hush, hush!' cried Claire, in agony.

'I don't see why. I'm sure he's everything that's good and brave; and you need not sob like that, my dear, for, from what I can hear, he isn't very badly hurt.'

Claire started. A dread that had been hanging over her was beginning to assume form.

'But they say it's a mercy that the Major's bullet did not go an inch lower.'

'Bullet? The Major! They have had a meeting?'

'Yes, my dear. I thought you must know, and I came to talk to you about even speaking to—there—there, what a woman I am. I came to do good, and I'm doing nothing but harm. Now, she's going to faint.'

'No, no!' cried Claire agitatedly; 'it is nothing. I am not going to faint, Mrs. Barclay, indeed. There, you see, I am quite calm now.'

'Yes, and I am sorry, my dear; but I am such a thoughtless woman. Barclay's quite right; I haven't no head at all.'

'No head?' said Claire, smiling, as she sat down close to her visitor and laid her hands upon her arm. 'Perhaps it is because you have so much heart.'

'Heart, my dear! why—no; I declare I'm most afraid to speak, for fear of saying something that may hurt your feelings.'

'If you will not speak about—about——'

'Mr. Linnell, my dear?'

'Yes, but only to tell me that he is not much hurt—you said so, did you not?' cried Claire.

'Yes, my dear; he's not much hurt. But, Claire, my dear, wouldn't it be better if you—so pretty and young as you are—did care very much for some one as nice and good as he is?'

'No, no,' cried Claire excitedly. 'Pray, pray say no more. It is impossible.'

'Well, you know best, my dear,' said Mrs. Barclay sadly; 'and you want me to talk about something else. Well, I'll talk about you, only you must not mind if I say something stupid. It's my way.'

'I am sure you would not say anything to wound me,' said Claire, kissing her.

'Indeed I wouldn't, my dear: and, do you know, ever since I found out how you people here were situated, through Mr. Denville coming to see my Josiah, who is the real best of men, I seemed to take to you like. I went home and had a good cry after I'd been here the first time, and seen you managing your poor father, and your sister and brother so well.'

Claire's brow grew troubled, but her visitor prattled on.

'You had another brother, hadn't you, my dear, who couldn't agree with your father like, and then went away?'

'Yes,' said Claire, bowing her head to hide her face.

'Ah, my Josiah told me so. Well, well, there's troubles in every family, my dear; and so long as pa has got you he has not much cause for complaint.'

Claire looked up, trying to smile, but it was a sorry attempt; and soon after her guest rose, assuring her that she need not be uneasy about Mr. Linnell.

'One word before I go, my dear, though, just as a secret. It isn't that I'm curious, because I don't care who it is marries, or whom they marry; but I've no girls of my own, and I do take an interest in you. Now, just in a whisper like. I am an old friend.'

'Yes, yes—indeed, you are. The only dear friend I have.'

'Then tell me now; put your lips close to my ear—it is to be Mr. Linnell, is it not?'

'Never!' said Claire firmly.

'Oh, my! And I told you to whisper. I won't believe it's that horrible Major.'

'Mrs. Barclay,' said Claire, putting her arms round her homely friend's neck, 'they say that every woman has her duty in life: mine is to watch over and help my father, and to be such protection as I can to my sister and brothers.'

'What, and not get married at all?' cried Mrs. Barclay, in a tone of disappointment.

'And never be any man's wife,' said Claire sadly.

'Oh!'

'Stop one moment, Mrs. Barclay,' whispered Claire, in a strangely hesitating manner, 'you do like me, I know.'

'Indeed, I do, my dear, though I must say you disappoint me horribly.'

'Then I want you—whatever comes to pass—whatever people may say of me—to try and think the best of me.'

'Why, my darling!'

'Yes: I know you will; but your confidence may be sorely tried, and I want you to think well of me always. I cannot do all I wish, and—and—I cannot explain myself; only think the best you can of me. Good-bye, good-bye!'

'She is the strangest girl I ever did meet,' said Mrs. Barclay, as she panted away in her thick silk and enormous open bonnet. 'Think well of her, whatever comes to pass! Why, of course I will, poor girl!'

## CHAPTER IX.

### AN INTERESTED PATRON.

'Well, Denville,' said Lord Carboro', 'I wanted to see you.'

'In what way can I serve your lordship?' said the M.C., with his best bow.

'A pinch of your snuff.'

The pinch was taken, and the box snapped and returned.

'Your arm.'

Denville's breast swelled as he offered his arm to the elderly beau, and a flush of hope rose into his cheeks. The sun must be coming out at last.

It was a pleasant thing to be seen walking along the Parade in so familiar a way with Lord Carboro', and to his great delight Denville saw that the Parade was well filled.

He expected that this would be only a temporary condescension from the wealthy old nobleman; but Lord Carboro' held on tightly, made a few very nasty remarks about some of the people they passed, and then said suddenly:

'Drelincourt has been asking me to interest myself with the Prince to get your boy a commission.'

'Indeed, my lord?'

'Yes, indeed. 'Nother pinch of snuff.'

The box—*sniff—snuff—snap*.

'Like to know what I said to her?'

'My lord, I am a father.'

'Yes, Denville, I know it. Well.'

The old man changed the conversation to make another remark or two about some visitors, and then said, suddenly returning to the subject:

'Drelincourt asked me to get the lad a commission.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'You don't think of letting that old harpy claw up the boy?'

'Oh, my lord!'

'Of course, it would be madness. I told her I'd see her ladyship made a mummy first.'

The M.C.'s heart sank.

'She means to marry fat Matt Bray. I hope she will. I said I'd see her ladyship made a mummy first, Denville; and—he, he, he! she showed real colour. It came up in her cheeks, all round the rouge. Poor old girl! she is as bad as her sister was: hates to hear about dying. Doosid awkward thing, old Teigne being killed in your house. I wonder who got her diamonds.'

Denville's hands began to tremble, and the beads of perspiration to stand upon his forehead.

'Must all die some day, I suppose. Great nuisance to think about if the weather's fine, Denville; but when it's a cold, easterly wind, or one's gout's bad, I often feel as if I shouldn't mind being tucked up comfortably. How do you feel about it, Denville? You're not a chicken.'

'My lord, I feel sometimes as if, once I could see my boy settled, and my daughter well married, it would be a relief to lie down and take the long sleep,' said the M.C. solemnly.

'Denville,' said Lord Carboro', after a pause, during which he held on tightly to his companion's arm. 'I've gone on for years calling you an artificial old humbug, with your deportment and niminy-piminy ways. I hadn't the common sense to see that they were like my wig and stock, sir—put on. I beg your pardon, Denville. I do, sir: I beg your pardon. You've the right stuff in you after all, and, sir—I'm very proud to tell you that what I wouldn't do for that old harpy, Drelincourt, I would do on my own account.'

'My lord!'

'Yes, sir; asked His Royal Highness, myself, and he said nothing would give him greater pleasure. Denville, your son has a commission in the Light Dragoons.'

'My lord, I—I——'

'Don't, don't, Denville,' said the old man, pressing his arm. 'Hold up man, or some of these idiots will be seeing

that you are moved. Take a pinch of snuff, man—of mine, and let's walk out upon the Downs, out here beyond the fishermen's cottages, and my sight isn't what it was, or I should have said that was Miss Claire going into yon fisherman's hut.'

'Impossible, my lord. Will you allow me to express my——'

'No, no, no. Not a word, Denville. Why, man, you are husky with emotion now, real emotion. Don't say another word about it. Only make the boy do us justice.'

'He shall, my lord,' said the M.C. in a broken voice.

'And now, look here, Denville; I'm about one of the most selfish old fellows that ever breathed, and I want to see if I can't have a little recompense for all my miseries and disappointments.'

'Yours, my lord?'

'Yes, sir, mine,' said the old beau. 'Do you think because I'm rich I'm happy? Not a bit of it. I haven't long to live though now, and I want to make the best of the time left.'

'My lord!'

'Hold your tongue and listen. I heard all about Rockley meeting Miss Claire and young Linnell thrashing him.'

'It was a most unfortunate affair, my lord.'

'I don't know that either. Pity young Linnell couldn't shoot and pop off that scoundrel Rockley. By the way, he looked daggers at me for getting your boy appointed to his

regiment; but the boy shan't disgrace the corps, if I find him money myself.'

Denville paused where they stood upon the Downs and gazed wonderingly at the old Earl.

'I make you stare, Denville. Well, I'll be frank with you, and you shall be frank with me.'

The M.C. bowed and wiped his streaming face.

'Of course she does not care for Rockley.'

'Good heavens, my lord; no!'

'Nor for young Linnell?'

The M.C. hemmed twice before he spoke.

'I, too, will be frank with you, my lord,' he said. 'It was in dead opposition to my wishes, but I'm afraid there was something between my daughter and Mr. Richard Linnell.'

Lord Carboro' looked at the speaker searchingly.

'It was an unspoken attachment, my lord, nothing more; and since that terrible event at my house—I am obliged to name it,' he said, with quivering lip—'whatever intimacy existed has been broken off.'

'Humph! Sure, Denville?'

'I have my daughter's word, my lord. That duel set me thinking; and like another father, my lord, of whom we read, I bespoke her roundly.'

'Oh! come, Denville, don't compare yourself to Polonius, man. He—he—he!'

'Only to that extent, my lord. As I say, I spoke to her, and she assured me that there was nothing whatever between her and Mr. Linnell, but gratitude towards a gentleman who saved her from insult.'

'Denville, that Mellersh is his friend; he ought to have shown the boy how to shoot the scoundrel.'

The M.C. was trembling with excitement. He was between hope and dread, for he could not but divine what was coming, and in spite of the glittering future it held up to his view he shrank from it with fear.

## CHAPTER X.

### AN ELDERLY SUITOR.

'GRATITUDE, eh?' said Lord Carboro' suddenly.

'Yes, my lord,' said the M.C., who was perspiring profusely.

'Deuced dangerous thing, Denville. Are you sure?'

'My lord, I have my child's word, and that is sacred.'

'Hah!' ejaculated Lord Carboro', 'you are right. Bless her! she is as sweet and true as she is beautiful. She stands alone here in her youthful dignity. Damme, Denville, I always look upon her as some beautiful Greek goddess, and I would have sooner gone to her funeral than seen that *roué* Rockley win her. I would, damme.'

'My lord, so would I,' said Denville huskily.

'And you would sooner go to her funeral than see her my wife, eh?' said the old beau abruptly.

'My lord, I did not say so.'

'Nor think it?'

Stuart Denville, M.C. of Saltinville, stood there out on the hazy Downs, trembling, obsequious, tossed by his emotions. It was so dazzling, this suggestion of an offer for his child's hand. May had married a rich man; but for Claire, his beautiful child, to become the wife of a wealthy nobleman—to become Countess of Carboro'! It was such an exaltation—greater than his highest dreams. But before him stood that withered old man, scanning him with his sharp eyes, and ready to probe him with his bitterly venomed tongue. He, to be the husband of his beautiful child. It was sacrilege.

'We agreed to be quite frank,' said Lord Carboro' sharply.

Denville drew a long breath, and biting his lip, called up before his mental vision the sweet soft face of his child wearing a new horror as he bore her this news, and trampling down, as it were, the great temptation, he cast off his mincing ways, his servile politeness, and in a quick, firm voice exclaimed:

'Will your lordship commence and set me the example? What do you mean?'

'Come, I like that, Denville. Spoken like a man. Well, I'll be frank. I have long been thinking of your child, and watching her, and as I have watched her I have loved—no, that is absurd at my age—my liking for her has grown. I have put it off and it has come back, and I have put it off again as I have heard some bit of scandal, but she has

always come out of it so spotless and well that I have grown more—well, infatuated.'

He paused for a minute, and then went on speaking earnestly.

'Then came that horror at your house, just as I had made up my mind to speak to you; and I said no: it was impossible; but the feeling grew. Yes, man, even at my age.'

Denville bowed, and drew himself up very stiffly.

'I waited, Denville, and was about to speak to you when this affair with Rockley and the duel took place, and I stopped at home and swore horribly; but the feeling still grew and grew, and as that has all passed away, I now ask you if you will give me your consent. I ask you as a gentleman, Denville, to address her and ask her if she will be my wife.'

Denville did not answer, for a tremendous struggle was going on within his breast, and it was hard to say which side would win.

'Hah!' said Lord Carboro', speaking quickly; 'you say I am very old. Granted. That I ought to think of my coffin instead of a wife. Granted. That I am an old fool; but there I join issue.'

Denville had raised his hands deprecatingly.

'I am not an old fool, Denville.'

'No, my lord, you are not.'

'I'll tell you why. I have said to myself that if this

beautiful young creature swore to be my faithful wife I could trust her. She would be a sweet companion for my declining years; and, God bless her! if she consented, I would repay her for the sacrifice. In a few years I should leave her young, rich, titled, and free to choose some more suitable companion than the old man she had tended to his grave.'

There were no marks lying on the ground as those two elderly men stood face to face alone on the short turf of the Downs; but it seemed as if they must have dropped a tear.

Neither spoke for some minutes, and then it was the Master of the Ceremonies.

'My lord,' he said firmly, 'you have given me this commission for my son as a bribe.'

'No, no, Denville, I swear I have not.'

'Take it back, my lord, for what you ask is impossible.'

'Impossible?'

'Fate has been very hard to me, my lord, and the burden has been too heavy at times to bear; but I cannot do this thing. I love my child too well.'

They stood gazing out to sea for some minutes, and only the rushing of the wind was heard, or the wailing cry of the gulls, but at last Lord Carboro' spoke.

'Denville, I did not know you,' he said gravely. 'I thought I had to deal with a different man; but don't let us be hasty. As to the commission, it is your boy's, and may he deserve it. As to what we have said, let us wait.

Don't refuse me absolutely, and don't say a word to Miss Denville. Give me leave to visit at your house, and let matters slide for a few months. Things may shape themselves so that you may change your mind; do you consent to this?'

'It would be like buoying your lordship up with false hopes.'

'That is my look-out, sir; do you consent?'

'I am your lordship's obedient, humble servant.'

'You are the man I offer to make my father-in-law? Answer me, sir, like a man.'

'I consent.'

'That's better. Denville, your hand. In future I shall know you as the man I have seen to-day. I never respected you one half so much before.'

## CHAPTER XI.

### JAMES BELL'S DECISION.

It was in honour of Morton Denville's reception into the regiment that the Master of the Ceremonies received. There had been some difficulty in the matter, but on the very first night that the young man dined at the mess, when, urged by Major Rockley, his brother-officers had decided to send him to Coventry, it so happened that 'a certain gentleman' was at Saltinville and had expressed his intention to Colonel Lascelles of looking in.

Consequently, it was decided not to transport the young subaltern to the Midlands that night; and as it happened His Royal Highness asked the Colonel who the tall youth was, ordered him to be introduced, and shook hands with the young man.

'Devilish gentlemanly fellow, your father, my lad. Always looks a gentleman, and carries a devilish good pinch of snuff. My compliments to him, and tell him I was glad to oblige Carboro'.'

'They were all as civil to me as could be, after that, Clairey,' said Morton, relating the meeting at home. 'Even Rockley shook hands after dinner, when we'd had a lot of claret, and he apologized about being carried away, he called it, and said we were brother-officers now, and must be good friends. I don't like him, though.'

Claire turned pale.

'I say, though, Clairey, I haven't said a word to the dad, but what am I to do? I turned cold and hot, and queer as could be yesterday. Whom do you think I met?'

Claire knew what was coming, but she did not speak.

'Fred. I'd half forgotten about him, and he's in my troop.'

'Did—did Fred speak, Morton?'

'No; he cut me dead, and of course he is James Bell in the regimental books; but, I say, isn't it awkward? I can't know him, you see, as my brother: what shall I do?'

'Fred has shown you,' said Claire huskily, as her troubles seemed to be on the increase. 'I will try and persuade him to leave the regiment. We must buy him out.'

'Yes, to be sure,' cried the boy. 'Oh, I say, what a clever old girl you are, Sis! Why, you're better than a mother.'

Claire smiled sadly as he kissed her and left the house.

That night she wrote to Private James Bell about the difficulty—a long sisterly letter, offering to get the money to buy his discharge, and alluding to everything as tenderly as the subject would allow.

In due time a crisp short reply came back:

'DEAR CLAIRE,

'No, I shall not leave the regiment. I want to keep my eye on the Major. Tell Morton not to be afraid. I am only James Bell, and I shall never presume. I am too well disciplined for that. Take care of your dear self.

'Good-bye, F.'

Claire wept over the letter, and hid it with her treasures. The difficulty seemed to have passed away, and she felt lighter at heart.

She had to prepare too for the evening that the Master of the Ceremonies had determined to give, not because he could afford it, but nominally, as intimated, in honour of his son's receiving a commission, more especially because Lord Carboro' had wished it, and said that he should come.

With such a visitor to give *éclat* to the proceedings, the difficulty was how to arrange to issue invitations, for Denville, with throbbing breast, felt that no one would decline.

He was in a tremor for days, as he thought the matter over, and was swayed by his ambition and his true manhood, to and fro.

At times he raised his eyes to find that Claire was watching him, and her cold candid look made him shrink within himself, as he thought of the past, and he shivered in dread lest she should display that terrible repugnance again, instead

of the sad, half despondent distance that had become her manner and her bearing towards him.

She never kissed him, but, when he took her hand, she suffered him to press his lips to her brow without flinching as she had at first, and he sighed and accepted his fate.

There had been times of late when the entanglement of his younger son's position in the regiment, with an elder brother a private in the ranks, had half driven him mad, keeping him awake night after night; and Claire had lain weeping despairingly as she had heard him pace his room, but the horrible difficulty he had been anticipating did not seem to come home, and he waited for the Nemesis that would some day arrive, hoping that he might be allowed time to complete his plans before the bolt fell.

He sat one morning, deciding with Claire to whom invitations were to be issued. Lady Drelincourt would come of course, as Lord Carboro' would be there, and several other notables had been invited.

'Then the officers of the regiment, of course.'

Claire half rose and looked in her father's face.

'We must forget that, my child,' he said imploringly. 'Major Rockley is a gentleman, and he has in some sort apologized to Morton. He told me so. To leave him out would be to insult him. He must be asked. His good sense will keep him away. 'You must ask Colonel Mellersh, too. He is a great friend of Colonel Lascelles.'

'You will ask Mr. and Mrs. Barclay, father?' said Claire.

'Oh, yes, we must. Dreadfully vulgar people, but it is a necessity.'

Claire sighed as she thought of what was behind Mrs. Barclay's vulgarity, and the note was written.

A couple of days passed, and everyone without exception had expressed his or her intention of being present, when, as he was on the Parade, Colonel Mellersh met the M.C., and said:

'By the way, Denville, I want you to invite my young friend Linnell to your party.'

'I shall be charmed,' said Denville, with a smile, for he could not refuse; and in due course Richard Linnell received an invitation and replied.

A little farther on, Denville came upon Lady Drelincourt in her chair.

'Ah, Denville, bad man,' she said, tapping him with her folded fan. 'I feel as if I could not come to your house. My poor dear sister!'

The houses on the Parade seemed to reel before the M.C.'s eyes.

'But one cannot grieve for ever. I shall come. Have you asked that wicked Rockley?'

Denville bowed.

'And Sir Matthew Bray?'

'All the officers whom duty will allow are coming.'

'That's well; and now, Denville, you must send an invitation with apologies to Mrs. Pontardent.'

'Lady Drelincourt!'

'I can't help it. She wishes to come, and I have promised that she shall.'

The result was that Mrs. Pontardent was invited, and in turn she expressed a wish that her dear friends the Deans, whom Mr. Denville had introduced to her, should not be left out.

The Master of the Ceremonies had the deciding who should be in society, and who should not; and here he was making a stand when Lord Carboro' came up—it was on the pier—and was appealed to by Mrs. Pontardent.

'Oh, yes, Denville,' he said good-humouredly; 'ask Mrs. and Miss Dean.'

The Master of the Ceremonies ruled the roost, but he was everybody's slave; and, in this case, the only way out of the difficulty after they had been neglected so long was to call with Claire and invite them personally.

'If you wish it, papa,' Claire said, when spoken to on the subject.

'I do not, my dear,' he replied, with a sigh. 'My position compels it.'

They went trembling: Claire in agony lest she should encounter Richard Linnell; her father about the expenses into which he was drifting, for the tradespeople were giving

him broad hints, especially the confectioner, that money must be forthcoming if the refreshments were to be supplied.

Cora Dean's eyes flashed with pride and jealousy as the visitors were shown in, but she received Claire courteously, and the wonderfully different pair were left together by the open window, while Mrs. Dean drew the Master of the Ceremonies aside.

'I am pleased, Mr. Denville,' she whispered. 'This is real good of you. I knew you would get us into society at last. Mrs. Pontardent has been very kind, but she ain't everybody. I wanted my Bet—my Cora—to meet my Lady Drelincourt and the other big ones. After this, of course, it's all plain sailing, and we shall go on. I say, just look at 'em.'

Denville turned with a sigh towards the bay window where Claire and Cora were seated, talking quietly, but with eyes that seemed to fight and fence, as if each feared the other.

'You go into a many houses and don't see such a pair as that.'

'Your daughter is a beautiful woman, Mrs. Dean.'

'*Lady*,' said the latter correctively; 'and so's yours, only too cold and pale. And now, look here, Denville, as friends—I know what's what.'

'Really, Mrs. Dean, you puzzle me.'

'Hush! Don't speak so loud. Look here, you've done

me a thoroughly good turn, and I'm a warm woman, and not ungrateful. As I said before, I know what's what. Parties ain't done well for nothing, and expenses comes heavy sometimes. If you want to borrow thirty or forty pounds—there, stuff! you must have your fees. I'm going to put half a dozen five-pound notes under the chany ornament in the back room. You can look round and admire the rooms and get it.'

His spirit rebelled, but his breeches pocket gaped horribly, and wincing in spirit, he rose and went forward to talk to Cora in his society way, starting, in spite of himself, as he heard the chink of china on marble, while, after a time, he began in the most graceful way to gaze through his eyeglass at the pictures and china from Mr. Barclay's ample store, ending by securing the notes in the most *nonchalant* way.

After letting a sufficient time elapse, the Denvilles took their leave, and Mrs. Dean broke out in ecstasy:

'There, Betsy, at last. You'll be a real lady now.'

'Yes, mother,' said Cora dreamily.

'I say, Denville isn't a bad one, only he has to be paid.'

'It's the custom, mother.'

'Oh, yes. You know what 'Amlet says, as your poor father used to make jokes about, and call breeches; but I say, isn't she a milk-and-water chit beside you, my gal? Didn't you feel as if you 'ated her?'

'No, mother,' said Cora thoughtfully. 'She's different to what I expected. I don't think she'll live.'

'Don't talk like that. Now, let's see what about your noo dress.'

'And yours, mother?'

'Of course. And feathers.'

And as this conversation went on, Stuart Denville and his daughter Claire walked homeward, the latter with the gloom deepening, so it seemed, over her young life, the former with the six crisp notes riding lightly in his pocket, and the load of misery and shame growing heavier day by day.

## CHAPTER XII.

### IN SOCIETY.

It was a proud time for the M.C., and he knew how it would be canvassed in Saltinville. All the principal people would have honoured his little home, and in the future he saw his fees and offerings doubled, and Claire well married—to Lord Carboro'. No, he could not say that, though the bait was glittering still before his eyes.

He was in the drawing-room waiting, with pretty May smiling out of her curls, hanging in her tawdry frame upon the wall; but Claire was not yet down.

If she would only forget that night and not avoid him as she did, how much less difficult this burden would be to bear.

He rang, and Isaac, in a new suit of livery, appeared.

'Send word to your mistress that it is time she was down, Isaac.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Is everything ready?'

'Yes, sir.'

'The cards on the tables?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And the refreshments?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You will ask Lady Drelincourt's servant to stop and help wait.'

'Yes, sir.'

'And the Earl of Carboro's.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Perhaps it would be as well to keep Mr. Burnett's man also.'

'Yes, sir.'

'I need say no more, Isaac, only that you will see that the tea and coffee are hot, and that the refreshments in the dining-room are ready in relays.'

'Yes, sir; everything shall be done, sir; and would you mind casting your eye over that, sir?'

'Certainly, I will do so, Isaac. Hem! An account, Isaac?'

'Yes, sir—wages, sir; and if you would make it convenient——'

'My good Isaac,' said the M.C. blandly, 'as you must be aware, gentlemen are in the habit sometimes of taking rather long credit, and of often being in debt. I might cite to you His Royal Highness. But no one troubles thereon, because it is well known that sooner or later His Royal Highness will pay his debts.'

'Yes, sir; of course, sir; but wages, sir——'

'Are wanted, Isaac, of course. Now, my good Isaac, you must have seen how much occupied I have been of late. No: say no more now. I will look over your statement, and you shall be paid.'

A tremendous knock and ring cut short this little scene, and Denville wiped the dew from his face as he uttered a low sigh of relief.

'She will come down now.—Ah, my dear Mrs. Barclay; my dear Barclay. Delighted to see you both.'

'I say, Denville, old fellow, you're going it, eh?'

'My dear Barclay, a sheer necessity. You see how I have placed my son.'

'Umph! yes,' said the money-lender, with a chuckle; 'but I'm no better off. You are. One less to keep, but at my expense.'

'But, my dear Barclay——'

'Ah, it's all very well, but you came to me to find the money for his outfit.'

'Now, look here, Jo—si—ah,' cried Mrs. Barclay, who was a wonder of satin, feathers, and jewellery, 'Mr. Denville has been kind enough to ask us to his party, and I will not have another word said about bills and money. I've come to enjoy myself, and I mean to. There!'

'Bless the woman!' sighed Denville.

'And where's Miss Claire? Oh, here she is. Oh, my

dear, how lovable you look in your plain pearl satin. Oh, I never did! Only oughtn't you to have a necklace on? I say, take me to your room, and let me lend you mine.'

She placed her plump hand upon a magnificent ruby necklet that she wore, but Claire checked her.

'No, no, no, Mrs. Barclay,' she whispered.

'Well, p'raps you're right, my dear. Nothing wouldn't make you look better.'

'Let me compliment you too, Miss Denville,' said Barclay in his brusque way; and, after a smile and a few words, he turned back to talk to his host.

'I say, Denville—why, it was in that back room that—why, you've made it into a back drawing-room.'

'For God's sake, Barclay!'

Denville caught at his visitor's arm, and looked at him in a ghastly way.

'Eh? Why, you look scared. Ah, well, it was stupid to mention it at a time like this. Mustn't allude to it when they are all here, eh?'

'For heaven's sake, no.'

'All right, I won't. I say, Denville, what do you think of that?'

He drew a case from his pocket, opened it, and displayed a necklace of large single diamonds, the sight of which made the M.C. start and shiver.

'Magnificent!' he faltered.

'I should think they are. All choice picked stones, sir Belonged to a Countess.'

'To a Countess?' said Denville, in a faltering voice.

'Yes, sir. I say, your bread's beginning to be buttered thick. Look here.'

He drew out another case as they stood alone in the front room.

'There's a set of pearls, sir. There's lustre and regularity. Two fifty guineas, Denville.'

'But, my dear Barclay,' said the host, striving to recover his equanimity, 'why have you brought those here?'

'Why have I brought 'em? Don't you know? Well, I'll tell you. Old Carboro' wants to pay a delicate attention to a lady he admires, and he bade me bring two or three things here to choose from. I mean to sell old Drelincourt the one he does not take. Look, I've two more lots.'

'But, my dear Barclay, surely you will not attempt to sell or barter here—in my house,' said Denville piteously.

'Not try? Oh, won't I, though! Why, my dear Denville, you don't suppose I came to waste time, do you? Not I.'

There was an announcement here, and Denville had to hide the feeling of annoyance mingled with pleasure that came upon him, for there could be no doubt in his own mind for whom the jewels were intended.

How would Claire treat the offer?

The guests began to arrive fast now, and the shabbiness

of the candle-decked room was soon turned into a suitably subdued setting to the rich dresses which Mrs. Barclay scanned in turn, and decided were not so good as her own.

The incident about the jewels troubled Denville more and more, and he found himself glancing from time to time at the beautiful woman in her simple, pearl-tinted satin, who was doing the honours of his house so gracefully.

'Yes,' he sighed, 'worthy to be a Countess, but——' He drew his breath hard. Poor as he was, it seemed too terrible a sacrifice.

Then the temptation came upon him very strongly again. Rich, admired, beautiful, an enviable position; and, once she was married, the terrible disclosure that would some day perhaps come would not affect her.

'Colonel Mellersh; Mr. Richard Linnell,' announced Isaac; and a feeling of jealous anger against the young man he had been obliged to invite came over him, but had to be hidden by a smile as the two new-comers advanced to Claire.

Denville watched them keenly; but Claire's face was as calm as if they had been total strangers. She gave them both a most courteous greeting. That was all.

'Lord Carboro',' announced Isaac.

There was a little excitement here, as the wealthy old beau entered, looking very keen and sharp, but very old; and as Denville saw him take Claire's hand, the feeling of

elation was swept away by a cold, despairing chill. It was impossible.

And yet, as his lordship stood chatting to the beautiful girl, Denville noticed that there was a change in her. She seemed brighter and more animated. She smiled at the old man's remarks, and once more the impossible seemed to be growing possible, for Claire was only a woman, after all.

Colonel Mellersh saw this too, and half sneeringly turned to Richard Linnell.

'There,' he said, 'much good you've done by making me bring you. I believe your syren has captivated old Carboro'.'

'Just look at the old man,' whispered Mrs. Barclay to her husband. 'Why, I declare, he's quite gallant.'

'Hold your tongue, and don't you let it go, old woman. Here he is.'

'Pinch of your snuff, Barclay,' said the old dandy, coming up smiling. 'My compliments to you, Mrs. Barclay. You look charming.'

'Oh, my lord!' said Mrs. Barclay, rising to curtsey, and saying to herself, 'As if I didn't know better than that.'

'I can't think what you were about to marry such an ugly old scoundrel as Barclay here. Have you brought anything?'

He took Barclay's arm, and they walked into the back drawing-room, where there were a couple of card-tables.

'Dick,' said Colonel Mellersh, 'old Carboro's going to

borrow money, or else — by Jove, he's getting a present from him for your beloved.'

'I thought you were my friend, Mellersh,' said Linnell, with his brow knitting.

'So I am. Look.'

'I am not a spy,' said Linnell coldly, and he turned away.

'What have you brought?' said Lord Carboro'.

'These diamonds, my lord, this string of pearls, and a large diamond bracelet. Look at these diamonds, my lord——'

'Don't talk. I don't want everybody to see. Lay them on the table. No: show me the pearls.'

'They are perfect, my lord, and——'

'Hold your tongue, man. That will do.'

'I'll slip out this bracelet, my lord. No; I'll go and give it to my wife. She shall put it on, and you can go and talk to her, and see how beautiful it is in design.'

'Hold your tongue, man. The pearls will do. How much?'

'Three hundred guineas, my lord. They are——'

'Bah! Robbery! I'll give you two hundred down. Do you think I want credit?'

'But, my lord, I should lose heavily.'

'And a doosid good thing too, Barclay. You want bleeding. Am I to have them?'

'Two fifty, my lord, as you are so old a friend.'

'Two hundred—in an instant. Yes, or no?'

'Well, yes, my lord.'

'Give me another pinch of snuff, Barclay, and hold the pearls in your hand, Never mind the case. Thanks, that will do. Come for the money in the morning.'

The exchange was ingeniously effected, but Colonel Mellersh saw it, and his lips tightened as he glanced at Richard Linnell.

'He's got the pearls, old woman,' said Barclay, going back to his wife where she sat fanning herself, and alone.

'How much?'

'Two hundred guineas.'

'Let's see; you gave the Hon. Mrs. Bedam fifty for 'em, didn't you, Josiah?'

'Yes; but they're worth a hundred, honestly.'

'And is he going to give 'em to Claire?'

'Don't know. Wait.'

'Lady Drelincourt, Sir Matthew Bray, Colonel Lascelles,' announced Isaac; and, before the small talk was half over, he shouted again: 'Sir Harry Payne, Major Rockley, Mr. Morton Denville.'

Richard Linnell told himself that he was no spy, but he could not keep his eyes from the group, as the officers entered, and were received by Claire.

It was a crucial meeting, but she bore it well, bowing rather stiffly to Major Rockley as he advanced in a deprecating way; and he was evidently about to stay by her side, but Isaac announced:

'Mrs. and Miss Dean.'

There was a little buzz of excitement.

'Mrs. Pontardent.'

This lady meant to be before her *protégées;* but she was in time after all, and after a quiet, unaffected welcome from Claire, they formed a little group by themselves, about whom, like flies attracted by bright colours, the officers buzzed.

Mrs. Pontardent was a tall, good-looking, lady-like woman, who patronised the Master of the Ceremonies when they spoke, and complimented him upon the appearance of 'his little girl.'

'You must bring her to one of my evenings, Denville.'

He would have said 'Impossible' had he dared. As it was, he said he should be charmed, and this set him thinking about how much money was won and lost there, when fresh arrivals took up his attention, and soon after Isaac announced:

'Mr. and Mrs. Frank Burnett.'

Claire uttered a sigh of relief as she shook hands with her sister and brother-in-law, the latter pairing off directly with one of the officers.

'Well,' said May eagerly, 'is all right?'

'Yes, dear; but they want money, and I have none.'

'Oh, dear, money again! Well, I'll see.'

'But, May dear, you must do something more.'

'What do you mean?'

'This task grows more difficult every day. You must really make some arrangements, or I shall be compromised.'

'Well, how shall I be? do you want me to be compromised? I declare you have no more feeling than a stone.'

'May—dear May!'

'It's quite true. I'm disgraced by my family at every turn. What with brothers turning common soldiers, and horrors in the house, and——'

'My dear Mrs. Burnett, this is an unexpected pleasure,' said Sir Harry Payne, coming up with Lord Carboro', who managed to cut in before Rockley, who was approaching Claire.

'Oh, what a wicked, wicked story-teller you are!' said May, with childish playfulness, as Sir Harry remained by her side, while Lord Carboro' led off Claire. 'You knew I was coming.'

'I did, I did,' he whispered passionately.

'Hush! Don't go on like that. Everybody is watching us.'

'Then when will you give me a chance to see you alone?'

'Oh, I couldn't think of such a thing.'

'May! dearest May.'

'Hush!'

The conversation was carried on in a low tone, and then May exclaimed:

'Oh, impossible!'

'It is not,' he said eagerly. 'It is simplicity itself.'

He whispered again, and May Burnett shook her head.

'I implore you,' he whispered. 'You know all I feel, but you are as hard and cold as you are beautiful. There, I swear if you do not consent, I'll——'

'Pistols, or off the pier?' said May, with a provoking smile.

'Oh, you are maddening!' he exclaimed. 'I believe you would like to see me lying dead.'

'Oh, no; I don't like to see dead people,' she said mockingly.

'All these weary months, and not one short interview. You are playing with me. Curse him!'

'Curse whom?' said May coolly.

'That husband of yours. I'll pick a quarrel with him next time we play cards and shoot him.'

'Ha—ha—ha—ha—ha!'

It was a sweetly innocent sounding little trill of laughter as ever passed from a provoking pouting rosebud of a mouth; and Claire heard it, and turned paler than ordinary, as she saw in whose company her sister was.

'You will excuse me now, Lord Carboro',' she said. 'I have my duties as hostess to attend to.'

'One moment,' he said, placing his back to the company, and gazing with a look of such reverence as he had not for long years felt for woman in the sweet face before him.

Claire looked up at him half wonderingly.

'I am a very old friend of your father, Miss Denville.'

'Oh, yes, my lord. I remember you when I was quite a little child.'

'And now,' he said, 'I am getting to be an old man, and you have grown into a beautiful woman. Will you—do not be alarmed; no one can see—will you accept this little offering from so old a friend, and wear it for his sake?'

He held out the lustrous necklace as he spoke, believing that they were quite unseen; but it was not so, for Colonel Mellersh said softly to Linnell:

'There, Dick, what did I tell you?'

'Lord Carboro',' said Claire, with quiet dignity, 'I could only take so valuable a jewel from—from——'

'A very dear friend, my child. Let me be that friend.'

She looked at him searchingly, and then dropped her eyes, saying nothing, but drawing back with a slight gesture that was unmistakable, and glided away.

'The mentor is not always right, Colonel Mellersh,' said Richard Linnell quietly. 'I feel as if I had been playing the spy, but I do not regret it, from the effect it must have on you.'

'Egad, she's a very queen,' said Lord Carboro', as he quietly took out his snuff-box, and dropped the necklet into his pocket. 'By George, sir, I never thought there was such a woman in the world.'

The conversation was at its height, and Claire twice over managed to intercept Sir Harry when he was approaching her sister, but only to be snubbed for her pains by May.

She was conscious that Rockley was seeking an opportunity to approach her, but she gave him none, her position as hostess giving her plenty of chances for avoiding those she did not wish to meet, in attending and introducing others.

'Hang the girl! she's a regular sorceress,' said Colonel Mellersh to himself. 'She'll end by charming me. I want a game at cards, and if I leave Dick, he'll be hanging on to her strings directly.'

'Well, mother, are you satisfied?' said Cora, as the evening went by.

'Satisfied? Oh, I don't mind, my dear, so long as you get on. And you are, you know, sitting here among the big people, I say, Cory, I am proud of you.'

'That's right, mother.'

'But I say, what did Colonel Mellersh say to you as he went to the card-table?'

'Asked me, as any gentleman would, whether he should take me down to have some refreshment.'

'Well, that was kind and neighbourly. I rather like him, but I do wish you wouldn't encourage that young Linnell so.'

'Mother!'

'There, I've done. I won't say another word. Don't fly out at me here. Now, that is a man to admire.'

'What, Mr. Richard Linnell?'

'No: stuff, Cory. You know who I mean—that Major Rockley. I couldn't hear a word he said to you. I wouldn't,

for I don't like to stand in your way. I say, Cory, he'll be a Colonel and a General some day. Why not him ?'

'Would you like to know what he said to me, mother ?'

'Yes ; he did quite make love to you, didn't he ?'

'Yes.'

'Hah, I thought so.'

Mrs. Dean's rings crackled as she rubbed her hands, and metaphorically hugged herself.

'That comes of getting into good society, Cora. Ladies drop into engagements without having to look after the gentlemen. You see, they are so brought together like. That Denville puts a sort of stamp on you like, and then you're in society, and handsome Majors come and throw themselves at your feet.'

'Yes,' said Cora, speaking through her teeth, 'and insult you, and dare to speak to you as if you were some beautiful toy brought and set up for their amusement.'

'Cory !'

'I tell you that every word he spoke to me in his mocking gallant way was an insult, and made my fingers tingle and my face burn. Mother, I've found out that there are two classes of men in the world.'

'Oh, my gracious ! now she's off again,' sighed Mrs. Dean.

'There are those who naturally honour and respect woman with all the manly chivalry of their nature, and those who look upon her as a being several degrees lower

than themselves. Mother, that man made me feel to-night as if I could kill him.'

'Oh dear; oh dear!' sighed Mrs. Dean in a whisper to her daughter, 'if this is coming into society, and you are going on talking in that savage way, we had better stop at home. I expect you snubbed the Major in that orty way of yours, and he has gone after that chit of Denville's.'

'Where? Has he mother?' cried Cora, in an excited whisper.

'Yes; he is bending over her and making big eyes at her. I say, he is a handsome man, Cory, and if I know anything, he's regularly took with her.'

'Are you sure, mother?'

'Sure? Just as if I couldn't tell in a moment. You might get him away from her if you liked, I dare say. Look at that.'

She drew back a little that her child might see where Rockley was speaking in a markedly deferential manner to Claire; and Cora's colour went and came, and her bosom heaved in unison.

'Bless your 'art, Cory, I ain't lived to my age without picking up a little. Why, since I've been sitting here to-night I've picked up no end, and if I was a scandalous old woman I could make any amount of mischief.'

Cora did not answer, for just then Lord Carboro' came up.

'Let me take you down to have a jelly, Miss Dean,' he said.

Cora looked up at him and was about to refuse ; but there was such a quiet, respectful look in the old man's eyes that she took his arm.

'I'll come and fetch you afterwards, Mrs. Dean,' he said and they crossed the room.

'There,' said Mrs. Dean. 'Now I'm a happy woman. It might be after all. Countess—not a Shakespeare countess or duchess for six nights only, as it says in the bills, but altogether. Hah, I paid for this party, and I don't grudge the money, and Denville's made himself a friend. I was going to say to my gal : there's that Sir Matthew Bray making up to old Lady Drelincourt, and that Sir Harry Payne to Mrs. Burnett, and Major Rockley to Claire Denville, and young Linnell as jealous as can be. And now, to top off with and finish the scene, Lord Carboro' comes and takes off my Cora. Well, we're in society at last.'

'Look here, old woman, this bracelet case is banging against my leg horribly, and if I have two things old Drelincourt will hesitate between them and take neither. If I've only one she may take it. I think I can get her alone now. Here, slip this into your pocket.'

'Oh, but Jo-si-ah, I can't.'

'Yes, you can, stupid ; you've got lots of room. Here, I want to clear my expenses to-night.'

'Why, you have, Jo-si-ah.'

Pooh ! That's nothing. Here, catch hold.'

He slipped the case into his wife's hand, and she took it and passed it under a fold of her satin dress.

Barclay strolled away to try and get hold of Lady Drelincourt, and just then Denville came up.

'My dear Mrs. Barclay,' he said, 'you have been sitting all alone so long, and I could not get to you, and poor Claire is so busy.'

'Oh, don't you mind me, Mr. Denville. I'm nobody.'

'But you must be faint.'

'Well, since you put it like that, Mr. Denville, I really have got such a dreadful feeling of sinking inside me that if it was only a sangwidge and a glass of sherry, I'd say bless you.'

'Come then, my dear madam,' said Denville. 'This way.'

She rose and took the offered arm, and Lord Carboro' smiled as the florid little woman went by him. Then he drew back by a curtain, and began taking snuff and watching Claire, as she now stood still, and he saw her meet Linnell's eyes just as Rockley, who had been watching his opportunity, was going up to her.

Linnell looked at her with eyes that said, 'May I come?' and he read that long, calm, trustful gaze to say 'Yes.'

'Very nicely done. In a sweet maidenly way,' said Lord Carboro'. 'How cleverly a woman can do that sort of thing, making one man a shield against another. By

George! she is a queen—a woman of whom a man might be proud.'

Rockley went scowling back, and threw himself on the seat where Mrs. Barclay had been; and from where he stood Lord Carboro' looked at him sneeringly.

'Old, worn out, withered as I am, handsome Rockley, if Claire Denville became my wife, I shouldn't care a snap for you. Ugh! why, I must be standing just where old Teigne was smothered. How horrible! Pish, what matters! Why should I care, when her dear sister is laughing and showing her false teeth there just where the foot of the bedstead used to be. Sweet girlish creature; she's ogling that fat dragoon, and she'll marry him if she can.'

He took another pinch of snuff.

'Hallo!' he muttered, 'Payne after that little strawberry cream of a woman. We shall have a scandal there, as sure as fate, and—good girl, she sees through her and cuts the enemy out. Claire, my dear, you are indeed a little queen among women. I've never given you half the credit you deserve, and—damme!—never!—yes—no—yes!—the scoundrel! Well, that comes of reckless play. Curse it all, there must not be such a scandal as this. Where's Denville?'

He looked round, but the Master of the Ceremonies had not returned with Mrs. Barclay.

Everybody was fully engaged, laughing, flirting, or card-playing. Assignations were being made; money was

changing hands, and the candles were burning down and guttering at the sides, as Lord Carboro' exclaimed :

'Hang it ! I did not think he could stoop to be such a scoundrel as that !'

## CHAPTER XIII.

### MAJOR ROCKLEY'S MISTAKE.

'Now, Barclay, you are a wicked flatterer,' said Lady Drelincourt, as she sat out in the balcony, with the money-lender leaning over her after leading her there and placing a chair.

'I shall risk being rude in my rough way,' said Barclay in a low voice, 'and repeat my words. I said those lustrous diamonds would look perfect on your ladyship's beautiful throat.'

'Now, you don't mean it, Barclay. I am not so young as I was, and my throat is not beautiful now.'

'There, I'm a plain man,' said Barclay; 'I've no time for fine sayings and polished phrases, and what I say is this: I know your ladyship must be forty.'

'Yes, Barclay, I am,' said Lady Drelincourt, with a sigh.

'I'm fifty-five,' he said, 'and what I say is, how a woman with a skin like yours can utter such deprecatory sentiments

is a puzzle. Why, half the women here would be proud of such a skin. Look how they paint. Pah !'

'They do, Barclay ; they do. Are the diamonds of good water ?'

'Look,' he said, holding them before him.

'No, no ; some one in the room will see.'

'I'll take care of that, my lady. Look at them. I daren't tell you whom they once belonged to, but they came to me through accidents at the gaming-table. They are perfect in match and size. Lady Drelincourt, you would not be doing yourself justice if you did not buy them. I wish I dare clasp them on.'

'No, no ; not now. How much did you say ?'

'I am giving them away at four hundred guineas, Lady Drelincourt.'

'Oh, but that's a terrible price, Barclay !'

'They will be worth more in a year or two, Lady Drelincourt.'

'Oh, but I could not spare so much money.'

'Pooh ! what of that ! If your ladyship likes the diamonds——'

'I do like them, Barclay.'

'I should be happy to give your ladyship what credit you require.'

'Really, this is very naughty of me, Barclay; it is, indeed, but I suppose I must have them. There, slip

them into my hand. You can send me the case to-morrow.'

'I will, my lady. You'll never regret the purchase, and I am delighted that they will be worn by the queen of Saltinville society.'

'Go away, flatterer, and tell Sir Matthew Bray to bring me my salts. I left them on the chimney-piece.'

'I fly,' said Barclay; and he went through the rooms to perform his commission, Sir Matthew hurrying to get to her ladyship's side, while Barclay turned to meet his wife who was just returning with their host.

'Hallo!'

'Oh, I am so much better now, Jo-si-ah. I was so faint.'

'Ah, Denville, I want a word with you,' said Lord Carboro', coming up box in hand.

'I say, old lady,' whispered Barclay, 'got that bracelet safe?'

'Oh, yes, that's all right; but you can't have it.'

'Why not?'

'Because it's right down at the very bottom of my pocket, where there's no getting at it at all. But you don't want it now?'

'No. I've sold the diamond necklace.'

'No!'

'I have, to that old hag, Drelincourt.'

'Did she pay you?'

'No; but we've got deeds worth four times as much, and I shall charge her interest until she pays.'

'Then you've had a splendid night, Jo-si-ah.'

'Glorious!' he said, rubbing his hands.

'Then I want a rubber of whist, and I shall see if I can't win a few guineas myself.'

'All right. I'll get you to a table.'

'Denville, old fellow,' said Lord Carboro', chatting with his host and taking snuff from the box given by the Prince, 'I've a bad habit of seeing everything that goes on around me.'

'Your lordship is most observant.'

'I'm sorry to say I am; and whether we become relatives or not, Denville, I take an interest in you and your belongings.'

The Master of the Ceremonies looked up in alarm.

'Take a bit of good advice, Denville.'

'My lord!'

'And keep a tighter rein over your daughter.'

'Your lordship's opinions seem to change easily,' said Denville bitterly. 'The other day my daughter Claire——'

'Pooh! Absurd, man! Stop. She is perfect. A princess could not have been a more charming hostess. I did not mean her. Look there!'

'Mrs. Burnett with Sir Harry Payne?'

'Yes; the fellow's a blackguard. The little woman married a fool——'

'My lord!'

'Who neglects her for drink and play. Don't be offended, Denville. I am your friend. You have had scandal enough in your family; you must have no more.'

Denville drew a long breath.

'Your lordship is right; but you must not misunderstand my dear child.'

'Pretty, sweet, young, and most impressionable, Denville. Constant dropping will wear a stone. Don't let the water drop on it any more.'

'My lord, you may trust me.'

'Stop, Denville. Another thing in confidence. You must get it back, treating it all as an error.'

'My lord, you alarm me. Get *it* back?'

'I can't help it, Denville. Do you know that sometimes dashing fellows, ruined by play, have gone on the road mounted and masked, and, pistol in hand, have robbed?'

'Yes, my lord. But we have no highwaymen here.'

'Don't be too sure. Did you know that Barclay, at my wish, brought some jewellery?'

'Yes, but not at my wish, my lord! I felt aggrieved—insulted.'

'Forgive him and me. It was at my request. I wanted to make an offering—a string of pearls—to your daughter;

and, like the sweet true lady she is, she has refused to accept them.'

Denville flushed and turned pale as he glanced proudly at his child, where she stood talking to Colonel Mellersh.

'I saw Barclay give his wife a case with a diamond bracelet in it, to hold while he went to old Drelincourt.'

'Yes, my lord. What of that?'

'Mrs. Barclay did not put it in her pocket, but let it slip down on the carpet.'

'Where was she seated, my lord?'

'Never mind; the diamond bracelet was found.'

'Thank goodness!' gasped Denville.

'By Major Rockley.'

'Who gave it back?'

'No; who has pocketed it, and will keep it; while Barclay will most likely credit you.'

'Impossible, my lord!'

'Possible, Denville. I tell you there must be no more robberies here. Hang it, man, stand up.'

'A sudden giddiness, my lord. I am better now. I will get the jewels back. But, one moment, my lord, are you really quite sure?'

'I am certain.'

'But Major Rockley may mean——'

'Hush, Denville. What do you know of handsome

Rockley? Do you think he will give the jewels back if he can get them away? Act; at once.'

'Suppose he is wrong,' said Denville to himself, as he went off on his painful task. 'What an insult to an officer —the Prince's friend.'

'I dare not do it,' he said after a pause. 'It must be some mistake. Such an act would be the work of a common thief. He must be wrong.'

He shrank from his task, but he felt that it must be done, for how could he let it go forth that there had been another diamond robbery from his house. It was impossible.

As he hesitated he caught sight of Lord Carboro' watching him. Barclay too was there, evidently about to speak to him, and he felt that he must. Better to offend Major Rockley than have another scandal.

He mingled among his guests with a word here and there, sending some downstairs, and interfering in a *tête-à-tête* between May and Sir Harry Payne, who had at last won a promise from the giddy little creature to whom he was paying court. He then went up to Rockley, snuff-box in hand, and addressed him as he was leaning against the chimney-piece.

'I'm afraid our little reunion has no charms for you, Major Rockley,' he said.

'On the contrary, my dear Denville, I am delighted.'

'But you have had no refreshment. Pray come down.'

'Without a lady?'

'Yes, without a lady. Or, no, I will speak now, and you can go afterwards. A little mistake, Major Rockley. You'll pardon me; a little mistake.'

His heart sank as he spoke, and he trembled almost guiltily at the task he had in hand.

The Major's dark eyes flashed as he scowled at him.

'If you mean, sir, that by addressing——'

'No, no, Major Rockley; a little mistake. You thought you dropped your snuff-box.'

'I thought I dropped my snuff-box, sir? Are you mad?'

'You'll pardon me, Major Rockley, no. You made a mistake; it is my duty to see the matter right. You imagined that you dropped your snuff-box, and you picked it up, when you were seated a little while ago.'

'Well, sir?'

If Lord Carboro' had made a mistake, how dare he meet that man again?

'You do not seem to understand me, Major Rockley. The case you picked up was not a snuff-box, but contained jewels belonging to one of my guests.'

'I did not know your guests carried their jewels in cases, Mr. Denville,' said the Major, with a forced laugh. 'They seem to be wearing them.'

'It is so easy to make a mistake, Major Rockley,' continued the M.C., on finding that it was more simple to attack than he had expected.

'I never make mistakes, sir,' said the Major haughtily.

'I should not have spoken to you like this, sir, if the act had not been seen,' said Denville, angrily now.

'Act? Seen? Good heavens, sir! Do you take me for a thief?' said Rockley, in a hoarse whisper. 'Do you think —why—confound! I am astounded!'

He had been angrily thrusting a hand into first one and then another pocket, bringing out a snuff-box, then a handkerchief, and lastly the little morocco case.

'That must be it, Major Rockley,' said the M.C. coldly; and their eyes met with a curiously long stare.

'As you say, Mr. Denville, mistakes are so easily made. I am in your debt for this—I shall never forget it. You will excuse me now, I am sure. The little matter has agitated me more than I should care to own.'

The M.C. bowed.

'Seen, you said, I think? Was it you who saw me pick up that case—by accident?'

'No, sir.'

'Would you oblige me with the name of the person?'

'It is not necessary,' said Denville. 'I am master of the ceremonies, sir, of my own house. This affair, I may tell you, will be kept private by us both.'

Major Rockley bowed and turned to gaze round the room, to see if he could select Denville's informant; but there was no one whom he felt ready to blame but Richard Linnell—

Barclay he knew it could not be—or was it that handsome Cora Dean?

He turned again close by the door, and tried to catch Claire Denville's eyes; but she was talking gravely to Linnell, so, half bowing to Denville, he said quietly:

'Thank you for excusing me. Of course, I rely upon the discretion of yourself and friend. Adieu.'

'*Adieu!*' and he left with curses and deadly threats in his breast.

'Had man ever such luck!' he hissed, as he strode by the house, glancing up at the well-lit balcony and drawing-room, from which he turned with an involuntary shudder. 'Curse the old idiot, but I'll serve him out for this presently. I wonder whether the old dancing-master cares for his girl and boy? Well,' he added, with a peculiar smile, 'we shall soon see.'

## CHAPTER XIV.

### AT THE CARD-TABLE.

'Friends?' Richard Linnell was saying, as he stood looking earnestly at Claire. 'Nothing more?'

'No,' she said, in a low, sad voice; 'always, come what may, your grateful friend.'

She turned to her sister, who was watching her, and met her with:

'Claire dear, you're going mad. That man hasn't a penny.'

'Well?' said Claire gravely.

'And you are encouraging him.'

'As you are encouraging Sir Harry Payne? No, May; you are mistaken.'

'I declare if you are going to insult me I will not stay, cried May, turning scarlet. 'It is disgraceful. It is cruel. If I could only find Frank——'

Just then a loud burst of angry voices came from one of the card-tables. It was eleven o'clock; there had been refreshments; the room was very hot, and the play, for

ladies, high; and now the voice of the Master of the Ceremonies was heard in protest.

'Ladies—ladies—I beg—I must request——'

'Order my carriage directly, Sir Matthew. It serves me right for coming to such a place,' cried Lady Drelincourt.

'Yes; you had no business here,' cried Mrs. Barclay.

'And mixing with such low people,' cried Lady Drelincourt.

'Low people? Better be low than not honest.'

'Oh! oh!—Denville, are you going to allow this insult to my face—from such a woman as that?' cried Lady Drelincourt.

'Hush, ladies! Pray—pray!' cried Denville.

'Hold your tongue and come away, old lady,' said Barclay, in a croaking whisper.

'I won't, Jo-si-ah; not till she pays me my four guineas, I declare,' cried Mrs. Barclay aloud. 'She's been doing nothing but cheat and rook ever since I sat down to play.'

'Sir Matthew Bray, my carriage.'

'And gone on shameful, and pretending it was all mistakes. I declare it's abominable.'

'Ladies—ladies!'

'Will you be quiet, old girl? Hold your tongue.'

'I will not, Josiah,' cried Mrs. Barclay, who, like many good-tempered, amiable women, took a great deal to make

her angry, but when she was really excited, was not to be suppressed. 'What I say is——'

'Oh—oh—oh—oh!'

A series of wild, hysterical cries from a couch in the front room, and Claire ran gladly from the painful scene to where her sister was in a violent hysterical fit, which, with the exit of Lady Drelincourt on Sir Matthew Bray's arm, after a withering glance round, quite stopped Mrs. Barclay's vituperative attack.

'Think of that now,' cried the latter lady. 'Me again. I ought not to come out.'

'That you oughtn't,' growled Barclay. 'Next thing will be you've lost that bracelet.'

'Nonsense, Josiah. Let me help you, Claire dear. I am so sorry, but that wretched cheating old woman was either kicking me under the table in mistake for that Sir Matthew Bray, or else cheating. I am so—so sorry. It's 'sterricks, that's what it is.'

'Yes, that's what it is,' said Mrs. Dean; 'and if I might say a word, I should tell Mr. Denville that he couldn't do better than behave like Lady Macbeth.'

'Oh, mother!' whispered Cora impatiently.

'Now what's the good of you "oh mothering" me, my dear? What could be better than for Mr. Denville to say to his guests, "Don't be on the order of your going, but go at once"?'

'Miss Dean,' said Sir Harry, 'your mamma speaks the words of wisdom. It is the wisest thing. Come, gentlemen, we can be of no service here. By Jove, she does it to perfection.'

Mrs. Dean's words broke up the party, and the visitors had nearly all gone, when, in answer to cold bathing and smelling-salts, Mrs. Burnett began to recover; and just then Frank Burnett, who had been, no one but Isaac knew where, came up to make a fresh scene as he threw himself upon his knees beside the couch, imploring in maudlin tones his darling May to speak and tell him what it was.

'Oh, my head, my head!' sobbed the stricken wife. 'My head, my head!'

'You'd better let her be, Mr. Burnett, sir,' said Mrs. Barclay. 'It's my belief that quiet's the thing.'

'Yes, and we'll go,' said Mrs. Dean. 'Good-night, Miss Denville. Good-night, Mr. Denville, and thank you so much. Come, Cora, love.'

Cora Dean glanced at Richard Linnell and Mellersh as she advanced to say good-night; for they were going to the same house, and it was possible, as the distance was short, that they would see them home.

'Good-night, Mr. Denville,' she said.

'We will say good-night too,' said Mellersh, 'unless we can be of any use.'

'Oh, no,' said their host. 'She will soon be better—a mere trifle.'

'Yes, please let me be,' said Mrs. Burnett. 'I shall soon be better now.'

'Good-night,' said Cora, holding out her hand to the woman she told herself she hated with all her heart.

But it was in a spirit of triumph, for Richard Linnell was going to walk home with her.

'Good-night,' said Claire, smiling in her face with a calm ingenuous look. 'I am glad we have met.'

How it came about they neither of them knew, but it was Claire's seeking; she was suffering so from that heart hunger—that painful searching for the love and sympathy of some woman of her age, while Cora Dean's handsome face was so near to her, and she kissed her as one sister might another.

'Well, I never,' muttered Mrs. Dean as she went down the stairs. 'Think of that, and you as don't like her.'

The next minute Cora Dean and her mother were walking along the Parade with Linnell and Mellersh on either side, chatting about the evening.

'One cigar, Dick, before we go to bed,' said Mellersh, when they had been sitting together in his room for some time, after parting from their upstairs neighbours.

'I'm willing,' said Linnell, 'for I feel as if I could not sleep.'

They lit their cigars, let themselves out, strolled down to the edge of the water, walked along by it in front of the

Parade, and went upon the cliff again, to go back silently along the path till they neared the house where they had passed the evening, walking very slowly, and ending by stopping to lean over the cliff rails and gaze out to sea.

How long this had lasted they did not know, but all at once, as Mellersh turned, he gripped Richard Linnell by the arm and pointed.

Linnell saw it at the same moment: the figure of a man climbing over a balcony; and as they watched they could just see the gleam of one of the windows as it was evidently opened and he passed in.

'Dick!' whispered Mellersh; 'what does that mean?'

'The same as the night that poor old woman was slain. Quick! Come on!'

'Stop!' said Mellersh. 'Here's another!'

## CHAPTER XV.

### MRS. BURNETT'S SEIZURE.

'I THINK we had better go too,' said Mrs. Barclay at last. 'But are you quite sure we can do no good?'

'No: indeed no, Mrs. Barclay; and I am so much obliged to you for staying,' replied Claire.

'It was the least I could do, my dear, after making all that miserable rumpus about a few paltry guineas. Your papa will never forgive me.'

'Indeed, there is nothing to forgive, my dear Mrs. Barclay. It was natural that you should be indignant,' said Denville politely.

'Thank you very much for saying so, but it's always the way if I go out, and I shouldn't be at all surprised if there's something else wrong,' cried Mrs. Barclay piteously. 'I'm a most unfortunate creature.'

'There, put on your things and let's go,' said Barclay huffily. 'Give me that case. I'll carry it now, or you'll lose that.'

Mrs. Barclay began to thrust her hand into her pocket, and Denville was talking to his son-in-law at the other end of the room, while Claire bent over and kissed her sister.

'Are you better now, dear?'

'No—o! Oh, my head!—my head!'

'My darling!' cried Burnett, coming back and bringing with him a strong smell of cigars and bad wine.

'Don't, Frank. Don't you see how ill I am?'

'Yes, yes, my own, but the carriage is waiting. Let me help you down, and let's go home.'

'Oh! My gracious! Oh!' shrieked Mrs. Barclay.

'Oh!—oh!—oh!—oh!' sobbed May Burnett, again in a worse fit than before.

'Now you've done it again,' cried Barclay angrily. 'There never was such a woman. Here, come along home.'

'The case—the bracelet, Jo-si-ah!'

'Well. What about it?'

'I knew something would happen. I felt it coming.'

'Stop! Where's that diamond bracelet, woman?'

'It's gone, Jo-si-ah. I've lost it. It's gone.'

'A two hundred pound bracelet, and gone!' roared Barclay. 'Eh, what? Thank ye, Denville. How did you come by it?'

Denville, who was standing in a graceful attitude, smilingly offering the case, explained that Mrs. Barclay had let it fall

beneath the seat when she thought that she was placing it in her pocket.

'Oh, Mr. Denville,' cried Mrs. Barclay, 'you *are* a dear good man!'

'Denville! Thank ye!' said Barclay, shaking hands. 'You might have stuck to that, and I should have been no wiser. I shan't forget this. Good-night, old man, good-night.'

'Coarse, but very kindly,' said Denville, after Mrs. Barclay had made Claire's face wet with tears and kisses, and he had seen the pair to the door.

'Yes,' said Burnett; 'they're a rough couple. Come, May, no nonsense. Get up. I'm not going to have my horses kept waiting all night.'

May made an effort to rise, but sank back, sobbing hysterically:

'My head!—my head!'

'Here, give her some brandy, Claire,' cried Burnett.

'No, no, no. It makes it worse.'

'Well, it will be better to-morrow. Come along.'

'No, no, I cannot bear it. Oh, my head!—my head!'

'Let me bathe it with the eau de Cologne,' said Claire tenderly.

'No, no. I cannot bear it.'

'Then come home,' cried Burnett.

'No, no,' moaned his wife. 'I'm so ill—so ill. Papa—couldn't I stay here to-night—my own old little room?'

'Yes, yes, my darling,' said Denville tenderly.

'I am so ill, papa. My head throbs so if I move it.'

'Let her stay, Frank,' said Claire sympathizingly.

'Not I. What! go home without her? I'll be hanged if I do!' cried Burnett pettishly. 'She'll be all right as soon as she gets out into the air. Now, May, jump up.'

He caught her by the arm, but May uttered a wail.

'Frank, dear, you are cruel,' said Claire.

'You mind your own business,' said the irritable little fellow sharply. 'She has got to come home with me.'

'I—I—I can't, Frank. I am so ill.'

'Nonsense! Sick headache. I often have them. You've taken too much wine.'

'She has not had any, Frank,' said Claire indignantly.

'Then she ought to have had some. That's the reason. You hold your tongue. Now, madam, jump up.'

The M.C. had stood looking on, with his face working, but saying no word till now that Burnett caught his wife roughly by both hands and tried to pull her to her feet.

'Stop!' he cried firmly. 'Really, Frank Burnett, you are ungentle in the extreme.'

'Here, I know what I'm doing,' he retorted. 'She's my wife.'

'And she's my daughter, sir,' cried Denville haughtily; 'and while I am by no half-tipsy man shall insult her.'

'Half tipsy? Who's half tipsy? This is the result of coming here, sir.'

'Where I have been on thorns for the last two hours, lest my guests should see what a state you were in.'

'State? What do you mean?'

'I will not expose you more before your young wife,' said Denville quietly. 'We are both angry, and had better say good-night. May, do you feel well enough to go home?'

'No; oh no, papa.'

'You hear, Frank Burnett. Claire, you can easily get her bedroom ready.'

'Look here, I shan't stay,' cried Burnett. 'I shan't stay here.'

'Well, go home then. We will take care of her, you may depend.'

'It's all nonsense. She shall come home.'

'My child is not well enough to go home,' retorted Denville.

'Frank dear, don't be obstinate, for May's sake,' said Claire. 'There, go home, dear. I'll get her to bed soon, and she'll be better in the morning.'

Burnett looked from one to the other with his teeth set, and was about to burst out into an angry tirade; but he met the firm, cold gaze of his father-in-law fixed upon him,

and it was irresistible. It literally looked him down; and, with an impatient curse, he left the house and banged the door.

Directly after they heard the rattle of carriage-wheels, and May uttered a sigh of relief as she watched the M.C. walk round the room extinguishing the candles.

'Oh, papa dear,' she sobbed, 'he does behave so badly to me!'

'My child!' said Denville sadly, as he bent down and kissed her. 'You are weary and excited to-night. Pray say no more.'

He left the room, and went downstairs to bid the servants leave everything till morning, and go to bed; and as the door closed Claire knelt down beside her sister, and laid her hand upon her burning forehead.

'That's nice,' sighed May; and then she sat up suddenly, glanced round, and flung her arms round Claire's neck to hide her face in her breast, and burst into a passionate fit of sobbing.

'Oh, hush, hush, May, my darling,' whispered Claire tenderly, as she kissed and caressed the pretty little head, which was jerked up again in an angry, spasmodic way.

'You saw—you heard,' she cried, with her face flushed and her eyes flashing, as she talked in a quick, low, excited manner. 'You blamed me for loving poor Louis. Why, he was all that was gentle and kind. He loved me in his fierce Italian way, and he was so jealous that he would have killed

me if I had given him cause. But so tender and loving; while this nasty, hateful little Frank——'

'May: oh, hush!'

'I won't hush. I hate him. I despise him. A mean, shabby, spiteful little wretch! You saw him to-night. He pinched me, and wrung my wrists. He often hurts me.'

'May!—May!'

'It's true. He strikes me, too; and I tell you I hate him.'

'May! Your husband, whom you have sworn to honour and love!'

'And I don't either, and I never shall,' cried May sharply.

'You must, you must, May, my darling. There, there; you are flushed and excited with your head being so bad, and Frank was not so gentle as he might have been. He was vexed because you had turned ill.'

'Nasty, fretful wretch!'

'May!'

'I don't care; he is,' cried the little foolish thing, looking wonderfully like an angry child as she spoke.

'Hush! I will not let you speak of your husband like that, May.'

'Husband! A contemptible little tipsy wretch who bought me of papa because I was pretty. I loathe him, I tell you. Papa ought to have been ashamed of himself for selling me as he did.'

'May! May! little sister!' said Claire, weeping silently

as she drew her baby head to her bosom, and tried to stay the flow of bitter words that came.

'Horses and carriages, and servants and dresses, and nothing else but misery. I tell you—I don't care! If he ever beats me again I'll run away from him, that I will.'

'No, no, little passionate, tender heart,' said Claire lovingly. 'You are ill and troubled to-night, There, there. You shall sleep quietly to-night under the old roof. Why, May dear, it seems like the dear old times, and you are the little girl again whom I am going to undress and put to bed. There, you are better now.'

'Old times? What, of misery and poverty and wretchedness, and having servants that you cannot pay, and struggling to keep up appearances, and all for what?'

'Oh, hush, hush, little May!' said Claire, holding her to her breast, and half sadly, half playfully, rocking herself to and fro.

'You don't know what trouble is. You don't know what it is to have your tenderest feelings torn. You never knew what it was to suffer as I have. I hate him.'

She could not see Claire's ghastly face, nor the agonized twitching of the nerves about her lips which her sister was striving to master.

'No one knows what I have had to suffer,' she went on; 'and it's too hard—it's too hard to bear. No one loves me,

no one cares for me. It's all misery and wretchedness, and —and I wish I was dead.'

'No, no, no, darling,' said Claire, as she drew the sobbing little thing closer to her breast; 'don't say that. I love you dearly, my own sister, and it breaks my heart to see you unhappy. But there, there, you are so weary and ill to-night that it makes everything look so black. I suffer too, darling, for your sake—for all our sakes, and now I will not scold you.'

'Scold me?' cried May, in affright.

'No, not one word; only pray to you to be careful of your dear, sweet little self. My darling, I am so proud of my beautiful little sister. You will not be frivolous again, and give me so much pain?'

'N—no,' sighed May, with her face buried in her sister's breast.

'Frank——'

'Don't—don't speak of him.'

'Yes, yes; he is your husband, and you must try to win him over to you by gentleness, instead of being a little angry tyrant.'

'Clairy!'

'Yes, but you can be,' said Claire playfully, as she pressed her lips upon the soft, flossy hair. 'I can remember how these little hands used to beat at me, and the little tearful eyes flash anger at me in the old times.'

Just then Denville entered the room softly, with a weary, dissatisfied air; but, as he stood in the doorway unnoticed, his whole aspect changed, and the tears stood in his eyes.

'God bless them!' he said fervently; and then, as he saw May raise her head, and look excitedly in her sister's face, he stepped forward.

'Well, little bird,' he said, bending down to kiss May's forehead, 'back once more in the old nest?'

Claire looked searchingly at him as she rose from her knees; and then she sighed as she saw May fling herself into her father's arms.

'There, there, I shall make the head ache again,' he said, with a calm, restful smile upon his lips, such as Claire had not seen for months.

'How he loves her!' she thought; and then another idea flashed through her breast. Suppose May knew!

'Claire, my child, is her room ready?'

'Yes; Morton's room is prepared in case he came back. She will sleep there unless—May, will you come to me?'

'Yes, yes,' cried the little girlish thing, in a quick excited way. 'No, no; I'll be alone. Let me go now—at once.'

Claire fetched and gave her a lighted candle, finding her clinging passionately to her father, looking, as it seemed to the thoughtful woman, like some frightened child.

She kissed him hastily, and seemed to snatch the candle from her sister's hand.

'Good-night, Claire,' she cried, holding up her face, and clinging tightly to her sister's arm.

'I am going with you, dear—as I used to in the old times,' said Claire, smiling; and they left the room together.

'Without one word to me,' said Denville, as he stood with clasped hands gazing at the door. 'Well, why should I be surprised? What must I be in her sight? Her father! Yes, but a monster without pity—utterly vile.'

He heaved a piteous sigh, as he sank into a chair.

'No,' he said to himself, 'I will not influence her in any way. I will not stir. It would be too cruel. But if—if she should lean towards him—who knows?—women have accepted the wealth and position such as he offers. No, I will not stir.'

He sighed again, walked to the drawing-room window to see that the bar was across the shutter; and, this done, he turned hastily and gazed back into the room that had been Lady Teigne's chamber, and as he did so the dew stood upon his forehead, for he seemed to see the bed with its dragged curtains, the empty casket on the floor, and by it the knife that he had picked up and hidden in his breast.

Yes, there it all was, and Claire standing gazing at him with that horrified look of suspicion in her beautiful face, as the thought came which had placed an icy barrier between them ever since. Yes, there she was, staring at him so wildly, and it was like a horrible nightmare, and——

'Father—are you ill?'

'Claire! Is it you? No, no; nothing the matter. Tired; wearied out. So long and anxious an evening. Good-night!'

She had come in to find him staring back into that room in a half cataleptic state; and the sight of his ghastly face brought all back to her. For a few moments she could not move, but at last, by an effort, she spoke, and he seemed to be snatched back by her voice into life and action.

'Good-night, father,' she said, trembling as she read the agonies of a conscious-stricken soul in his countenance, and she was moving towards the door, when, with an agonized cry, he turned to her.

'Claire, my child, must it be always so?' he cried, as he clasped his hands towards her as if in prayer.

'Father!' she said, in a voice almost inaudible from emotion.

'Claire, my child,' he moaned, as he sank upon his knees before her: 'you do not know the burden I have to bear.'

She did what she had not done for months, as she stood trembling before him; laid one hand upon his head, while her lips parted as if to speak, but they only quivered and no words came.

At last, with a sobbing cry, she flung herself upon his neck, and he clasped her in his arms.

'Not to me, father,' she sobbed, 'not to me; I am not your judge.'

'No,' he said softly, as he reverently kissed her brow; 'you are not my judge.'

His lips parted to speak again, but he shook his head, while a sad smile came into and brightened his countenance.

'The load is lighter, Claire,' he said softly. 'No, you are not my judge. If you were you would not condemn me unheard, and I cannot—dare not speak.'

He led her towards the door, and stood watching her as she passed upstairs and out of sight, turning her face to him once before she closed the door.

'The sweet pure angel and good genius of my home,' he said softly, with bent head, and with a calmer, more restful look in his countenance he went slowly to his own room.

All was soon dark and silent in the house so lately busy with the noise and buzz of many guests. Five minutes had not elasped when the door was softly pushed open, and a slight little figure entered, and crossed to the window.

The noise made was very slight, as the swinging bar across the shutters was lifted and lowered, one of the shutters folded back, the fastening raised, and the window pushed ajar.

The figure stood in the semi-darkness in the attitude of

one listening, and then drew back with a peculiar sigh as of one drawing in breath.

A couple of minutes passed, and then there was a scraping, rustling noise outside, the semi-darkness was deepened by a figure in the balcony, the window was drawn outwards, and a man passed in, whispering:

'May—sweet—are you there?'

A faintly uttered sigh was the response, and quick as thought the French window was closed, a step or two taken into the silent drawing-room, and May Burnett was tightly clasped in the arms of the nocturnal intruder.

'My darling!'

'No, no. Now one word, and you must go,' she whispered quickly. 'I have done as I promised; now keep your word—to stay only one minute—say one word and go.'

'And I will keep it,' he cried, 'my beautiful little love, my——Damnation!'

May started from his arms, for at that moment there was a thundering knock at the front door, and a violent drag at the bell.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### FOR HER SISTER'S SAKE.

'Oh, go—go quickly,' cried May excitedly. 'It is my husband come back; what shall I do?'

'Stop!' cried Sir Harry. 'Listen!'

'No, no; they are knocking again. My father will hear.'

'But——'

'No, no, you must not stay. Go,' she panted, and as she spoke, in her hurry and alarm, she pushed him towards the window.

'Confound it all!' he muttered, as he opened it softly.

'Pray, pray be quick,' she cried. 'Oh, do—do go.'

'Impossible!' he whispered back. 'They would see. Hide me.'

'I can't—I can't.'

'You must. Somewhere here.'

'No, no! You must go. Oh, what shall I do? I am lost—undone.'

'Hush, little woman! Be calm,' he said in a hoarse

whisper. 'I don't know much about this house. Here, I will go downstairs.'

'But you cannot; the footman will see you.'

'Then, curse it all, hide me upstairs,' cried Sir Harry impatiently.

'My father—my sister—what shall I do!—Oh!'

That was all the visitor heard, and the faint cry that ended the sentence was drowned in a second tremendous peal at knocker and bell.

'Confound her! she's gone. May! hist!—May!—Don't leave me like this!'

He felt about for the door, but could not find it in his dread and confusion. Only one part of the room could he make out, and that was the window, by which flight was impossible without being seen.

'Little wretch!' he muttered. 'What a fool I am! Where is the cursed door? There were three here somewhere. What the devil am I to do? Curse——'

He kicked against a chair, and nearly knocked it over, and then stumbled against a couch.

'The door must be here somewhere,' he muttered. 'Yes, there.'

It was plain enough where the door was now, for a light shone beneath it, and the sides looked light, showing its shape, just as another peal came from knocker and bell.

He had just time to drop down behind the sofa when the

door opened, and the Master of the Ceremonies appeared in his long dressing-gown, candle in hand, crossed the drawing-room, and, opening the farther door, went through, and it swung to, leaving the intruder once more in darkness.

He started up again as he heard the rattle of locks and bolts below, and made for the window, meaning to escape by it as soon as those who had alarmed the house had entered.

'Curse him! Mellersh left to watch,' he muttered, as voices were heard from below—loud and angry voices—mingled with those of remonstrance.

'I tell you we saw a man climb up and enter by the balcony,' came up; and in his alarm and horror the intruder knocked over an ornament now, as he made for the door that led to the bedrooms—his last chance of escaping unseen.

'Ah, there she is,' he said beneath his breath, as the door was made visible once more by the rays of light all round.

'Come up, then, and I will search the place,' came from below.

'Don't be alarmed: I'm going to see,' said a voice outside the door leading to the upper staircase; and the next moment the door opened, and Claire, in her white dressing-gown, entered candle in hand.

'Sir Harry Payne!' she cried, as the light fell on the figure of the visitor.

'Hush! For heaven's sake, quick! Hide me somewhere. Quick! Before it is too late.'

He had caught her by the arm and laid one hand upon her lips; and as she was trying to release herself, the other door opened, and Denville entered, closely followed by Frank Burnett and Richard Linnell.

'Claire! Sir Harry Payne!' cried the Master of the Ceremonies.

'Oh, that's it, is it?' said Burnett, with a grin. 'No murder this time, except reputation. I had made up my mind to come and stop to-night, as my wife's here; but, after this, the sooner she's out of this place the better. Here, call her, some of you. Where's her room?'

Claire did not speak, but stood there, as if turned to stone, her eyes fixed upon the cold, stern face of Richard Linnell, as he stood back by the door.

'Sir Harry Payne, speak, I insist,' cried Denville fiercely. 'What does this mean?'

'Hush, sir! Hush! pray, gentlemen. A little bit of gallantry, nothing more.'

'Sir!' cried Denville.

'Hush, sir, pray!' cried Sir Harry, who was white and trembling with dread. 'No noise—the neighbours—the scandal. Perfectly innocent, I assure you. An assignation. I came to see Miss Denville here.'

Claire turned her eyes slowly from Richard Linnell, whose

look seemed to wither her, and fixed them on the despicable scoundrel, who was screening her sister before her husband, but who would not meet her stern gaze.

'I thought as much,' said Burnett, with a sneer. 'I tell you what——'

'Silence!' hissed a voice in his ear, and a broad, strong hand came down on his shoulder with a grip like a vice.

Claire saw it—the brave, true effort to defend her in her disgrace, and she lifted her eyes once more to Linnell's. Then she let them close, and stood there silent, with the sweet little girlish innocent-looking face of her sister before her, as she stayed listening to the condemnation of husband and father—little May, her father's darling—in her place. One word would save her, would clear her in the sight of the man who loved her, and of the father who stood sternly there; but she must condemn May to save herself, and she stood there as if convicted of the shameful act.

For she spoke no word, and her sister's fame was saved.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### A STAUNCH FRIEND.

'No, Miss Clode; I can be angry, and I can speak my own mind, but I'm not going to be so mean and shabby as to take my custom somewhere else, though it is so tempting; but what I say is this—don't you never say a word to me again about that young lady, or I shall fly out.'

'I'm very sorry, ma'am, I'm sure, and you and Mr. Barclay are such good customers, besides being my landlord and landlady.'

'Oh, there's nothing in that, Miss Clode. You pay your rent to the day, and, as Mr. Barclay says, it's a business transaction.'

'Of course, it's very painful to me, Mrs. Barclay, and I shouldn't have told you what I did, only you know you cam and asked me what people were saying.'

'Well, so I did. Yes, you're right, I did. But it isn't true, Miss Clode. Miss Claire Denville is as good as gold, and people tell most horrible stories, and where you get to

know so much I can't think. But does everybody talk about it?'

'Yes, ma'am, everybody; and Mr. and Mrs. Burnett haven't been there since.'

'I don't care: I won't believe it. And is it a fact that she goes regularly to Fisherman Miggles's to see that little girl?'

'Yes, ma'am, regularly.'

'Then she has a good reason for it. There!'

'It's a terrible blow for Mr. Denville, of course, ma'am; and they say the young gentleman who has only just joined the dragoons is horribly put out, and challenged Sir Harry Payne, only the Colonel would not let them fight.'

'Dear—dear—dear! Poor Denville! he has nothing but misfortunes. I am sorry for him; I am indeed. Well, I must go; but mind this, Miss Clode: Claire Denville is a particular friend of mine, and no one shall say ill of her in my presence.'

There was a very strong resemblance to a ruffled hen, whose chickens had been looked at by a strange cat, in Mrs. Barclay's aspect as she left Miss Clode's, while, at her aunt's command, Annie, the bun-faced, moved a Berlin wool pattern on one side in the window so that she could command a view of the Parade from the bulging panes, and after watching there for a few minutes she said:

'She's gone by, auntie.'

'Ah, with all her fuss, she daren't keep up the acquaintance.'

'She has turned back and gone in, auntie.'

'Oh, very well, just as she likes; it is no business of mine.'

Annie, the innocent, was quite right, for Mrs. Barclay had walked by the Denvilles', and then stopped short, indignant with herself; turned back and given a good bold rap at the door, to which Isaac, who looked discontented and strange, replied, and said, before he was asked:

'Not at home.'

'Now don't you talk nonsense to me, young man,' said Mrs. Barclay, 'because——'

'My master and mistress are—not—at——'

Isaac began to drag his works towards the last, for Mrs. Barclay was rummaging in her reticule for a half-crown, but could only find a good old-fashioned crown, which she slipped into the footman's hand.

To a man-servant who was beginning to look upon his arrears of wages as doubtful, a crown-piece was a coin not to be despised, and he took it and smiled.

'Mr. Denville is out, I suppose, isn't he?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Well, I don't want to see him, but just you go and ask Miss Claire to see me, and if she says no, you say I must see her. There!'

The result was that Mrs. Barclay was shown into the drawing-room, where Claire rose to meet her with cold dignity, and pointed to a chair.

Instead of taking it, Mrs. Barclay caught the girl in her arms, and gave her rapidly some half-dozen hearty kisses.

'There, my dear,' she said, 'if every bit as I've heard was quite true, I should have come all the same; but as I don't believe one single synnable of the pack o' lies, I've come to see you. There!'

That *there* came like an expiration of the breath as she plumped herself down, and the next minute Claire was upon her knees, her arms round the wide waist, and her face buried in the extensive bosom, sobbing violently, and relieving herself in tears of the pressure that had been crushing her down ever since the troubles of that terrible night.

'That's right, my darling: you cry—cry hard. A good cup o' tea and a good cry's the greatest blessings o' Providence for us poor suffering women. No, no: you needn't put a hankychy between. My Jo-si-ah never stints me in dresses, and you may spoil a dozen of 'em if that'll do you any good.'

'Mrs. Barclay—Mrs. Barclay!'

'No, no, no: you're going to take and try and explain and a lot more of it; but I won't hear a word. I tell you I don't believe nothing of what's about. I said if Miss Claire Denville did this or that, she had good reason, being like the mother of that family, as even manages her poor father, so I don't want to hear no lying scandal.'

'Heaven bless you!' sobbed Claire, kissing her.

'Ah, that's nice,' said Mrs. Barclay, smiling. 'My little girl died, my dear, as would have been as old as you. Not like you, of course, but it seems as if she might have kissed me like that. I'm a very vulgar sort of woman, I know, my dear, well enough: and if I didn't I soon should, with people sneering at me as they do. You ain't sorry I came?'

'Sorry? I can never say how it has touched me.'

'I'm very glad of it, for I don't want to know. And now, not another word about all that, for I know everything, and how all the people are cutting you and your poor pa. But never you mind, my dear. Lots of the people you knew were very fine-weather friends, such as run away as soon as a storm blows. You've got a clear conscience, so don't you take on about it, but live it down.'

'I shall try to,' said Claire, with a smile—the first that had been seen on her face for days.

'It's what I often say to my Jo-si-ah, though I haven't got a clear conscience through Barclay's money transactions, which ought to be on his, but as I keep his books, and know everything, they trouble me all the same. So everybody's cutting you, eh?'

'Yes,' said Claire sadly.

'Then you cut them till they beg your pardon. And now, my dear, just one word from a simple plain woman, whose heart's in the right place. If you want some one to confide

in, or you want help of any kind, you know where Betsey Barclay lives, and that's where there's help, whether it's a kind word, a cup o' tea, or some one that you can put your arms round and cry upon, and whose purse is open to you, if you'll excuse me for mentioning it.'

'Miss Dean, ma'am,' said Isaac, opening the door.

'Not at——'

'Which I thought you were receiving, ma'am,' said Isaac in defence.

Mrs. Barclay rose to go, but Claire laid a hand upon her arm, and she resumed her seat as Cora Dean entered, elaborately dressed, and exchanged a most formal courtesy as the visitor rose once more.

Cora could not have explained her visit, even to herself. She hated Claire: she loved her. She was triumphant over her fall: she was sorry for her. She was certain that she would no longer find in her a rival, and in spite of this, she felt a curious sensation of soreness of heart.

She who had for a couple of years past been slighted by the fashionable folk of Saltinville, while Claire had been received everywhere, felt in the new flush of the success she had won a kind of triumph over an unfortunate sister, who would now, she knew, be socially ostracised; and in the plenitude of her own wealth of position she had told herself that she could afford to go and call upon the fallen rival, and, under the guise of politeness, see for herself how

she bore her trouble, and assume a consolatory *rôle* that she told herself she did not feel.

But Cora Dean, ill-educated and badly brought up, violent in her passions and quick to dislike a rival, had a very kindly woman's heart within her breast; and as soon as she had formally saluted Mrs. Barclay, and had seen the sad, grave face that met hers, ready to suffer insult if it were offered in the guise of friendship, a change came over her, the tender heart leaped, and in full remembrance of their last parting, she advanced quickly and kissed Claire warmly.

There was no disguising the tears in her eyes, and they were infectious, for Mrs. Barclay, whose feathers had been rising fast and her tongue sharpening into a point, heaved a tremendous sigh as she jumped up and exclaimed:

'It's very little I know of you, Miss Dean, and—I'm a plain woman—I never thought I should like you; but if you wouldn't mind, my dear!'

It was a kiss of peace, and Mrs. Barclay added another that was very loud and very warm.

'And her saying that she had no friends,' she exclaimed. 'Pooh!'

Claire darted a grateful look at both, and then began to wince and shrink as Mrs. Barclay, in all well-meaning, went on talking from one to the other with the most voluble of tongues.

'I declare,' she cried, 'as I said to my Jo-si-ah, there's no end to the nasty scandals talked in this miserable town.'

'Pray say no more, Mrs. Barclay,' cried Claire; 'I am so grateful to you both for coming here, but——'

'I won't say much, my dear, but I must tell Miss Dean, or I shan't be able to bear myself. What we want here is a great high tide to come all over the place and wash it clean.'

'Why, we should be drowned, too, Mrs. Barclay,' said Cora, laughing.

'I hope not, my dear, for I'm no lover of scandal; but do you know, they actually have had the impudence to say that my dear Claire here has been seen at her back door talking to a common soldier.'

Claire tried to control herself, but her eyes would stray to Cora Dean's and rest there as if fascinated.

'When the reason is,' continued the visitor, as Claire was asking herself should she not boldly avow her connection, 'the reason is that she has been seen talking to her brother, who is not a common soldier, but an officer. What do you think of that?'

Cora turned to her, smiled, and said:

'I can believe in the Saltinville people saying anything ill-natured for the sake of petty gossip. We had much to contend against when we came.'

'Of course, you had, my dear. Look at me, too: just

because my poor Jo-si-ah does money business with some of the spendthrifts, and, of course, lets 'em pay for it, I'm made out to be the most greedy, miserly, wicked, drinking woman that ever breathed. I'm bad enough, I dare say, and between ourselves I do like a glass of hot port wine negus with plenty of nutmeg; but I am not so bad as they say, am I, my dear?'

'You are one of the truest-hearted women I know,' said Claire, taking her hand.

'There's a character for me, my dear,' said Mrs. Barclay, turning to Cora and nodding her head and laughing. 'Ah, I must tell you that too,' she cried as the recollection came, 'just because——'

'Mrs. Barclay,' said Claire, rising, 'pray spare me. I am not well; I have not been well lately, and—and— I know you will forgive me.'

'Forgive you, my dear?' cried Mrs. Barclay. 'Why, of course. It's horribly thoughtless of me. There, good-bye. Are you coming, Miss Dean?'

Cora rose, feeling that she could not stay longer, and after a warm leave-taking, during which the two younger women mentally asked themselves whether they were friends or bitter enemies, Claire's visitors withdrew and walked together along the parade.

The slightest touch set Mrs. Barclay's tongue going, and before they had gone far Cora was in full possession of the

newly-retailed story about Claire's visits to the fishermen's huts.

'And do you believe this of her?' said Cora, with an eagerness that she could not conceal.

'Now, we're just become friendly, my dear, and I should be sorry to say anything nasty, but I ask you do I look as if I believed it?'

'You look as if you were Claire Denville's best friend,' said Cora diplomatically.

'And so I am,' replied Mrs. Barclay proudly. 'I can't help people talking scandal. They glory in it. And, look here, my dear, it isn't far from here, and if you don't mind, we'll go along the cliff to the very house and call.'

'Call!' said Cora in amaze.

'Yes; it's at a fisherman's, you know—Fisherman Dick's—and we can get a pint or two of s'rimps for tea.'

The consequence was that Cora did walk along the cliff to Fisherman Dick's cottage, and when Mrs. Barclay reached her house an hour later her reticule bag was bulging so that the strings could not be drawn close, and the reason why was—shrimps.

On the other hand, Cora Dean had not filled her reticule with shrimps, but her mind with unpleasant little thoughts that made it bulge. Curious thoughts they were, too, and, like Mrs. Barclay's shrimps, all jumbled together, heads and tails, ups and downs. She felt then that she could not

arrange them, but that there was a great sensation of triumph in her breast, and what she wanted to do most was to sit down and think—no easy task, for her brain was in a whirl.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### A STORMY SCENE.

'I've never dared to write to you before, Clairey. Frank watches me so; but, though I don't come, I think lots about you, and I shall never forget what a dear, good thing you were that night. Good-bye. We must be separate for a bit, till that bother's all forgotten, but don't you fidget; I'm going to be so good now.'

Claire was reading the note that had come to her, she knew not how, for the second time, wondering how a woman —her sister—could be so utterly heartless; and, after leaving her to bear the brunt of Sir Harry Payne's shameless accusation, treat it all as such a mere trifle.

Claire held the letter in her hand, with her spirits very low, and a bitter, despairing look was in her eyes as she sat gazing before her, thinking that no greater trouble could come to her now.

Richard Linnell had just passed the house, and though

ever since the night of the 'At Home,' she had shrunk away and rigidly kept from noticing him, the one pleasure she had longed for was to see the grave, wistful look he was in the habit of directing at the window. Now, he had gone by without raising his eyes.

It was the most cruel pang of all. He might have had faith in her, even if she had rejected his suit, and told him that it was hopeless in the extreme.

Her cheeks burned as she thought of Cora Dean with her Juno-like face and her manifest liking for Richard Linnell.

'What is it to me?' she said to herself; and her tears fell fast upon the letter she held in her hand, and she did not hear her father enter the drawing-room, nor see him glance quickly from her in the flesh to the sweetly innocent face of his favourite child, smiling down upon him from the young Italian artist's canvas.

Then he caught sight of the letter, and saw that she was weeping.

An angry flash came into his eyes; the mincing dandyism gave place to a sharp angular rigidity, and stepping quickly across the intervening space that separated him from his child, he was about to take the note from her hands.

Claire uttered a faint cry of alarm, started from the sofa, and hastily thrust the folded paper into her pocket.

'That letter,' he said, stamping his foot, 'give me that letter.'

'No, no, I cannot, father,' she cried, with a look of terror at his worn and excited face.

'I insist,' he cried. 'I will not allow these clandestine correspondences to be carried on. Give me the letter.'

'Father, I cannot,' she said firmly.

'Am I to take it from you by force?' he cried. 'Am I, a gentleman who has struggled all these years to make himself the model from which society is to take its stand, who has striven so hard for his children, to be disgraced by you?'

No answer.

'Heaven knows how I have struggled, and it seems that two of my children must have been born with some base blood in their veins, and to be for ever my disgrace.'

Claire raised her eyes to his full of pitying wonder.

'See how your—no, God help me!' he cried wildly, 'I dare not utter his name. See how you have disgraced your married sister—lowered me in the eyes of society. I am almost ruined, and just at a time when I had succeeded in placing your brother well. And now, see here—see here!'

He tore a note from his breast, and held it out rustling in his trembling hand.

'Here—I will not punish you more by reading it aloud,' he said; 'but it is from my own son.'

'From Fred?'

'Silence, woman!' cried Denville, with a wild look of agony in his eyes, and a ghastly pallor taking the place of

the two feverish spots that had stood in his cheeks. 'I have no such son. He is an outcast. I forbid you to mention his name again.'

He stood quivering with a curious passion, his lips moving, his eyes staring wildly, and he beat one hand with the open letter he held in the other.

'Here!' he exclaimed at last, 'from Morton—to say that, under the circumstances, he feels bound—for the sake of his own dignity and position in his regiment, to hold aloof from his home. The regiment will soon change quarters, and in time all this, he hopes, will be forgotten. Till then, all is to be at an end between us. This—from my own son.'

He began to pace the room nervously, thrusting back the letter; and then he turned upon Claire again.

'Not content, you still go on. Clandestine correspondence. Let me see who wrote that.'

'I cannot, father.'

'But I insist. Here, just when I had had your hand asked in marriage by one who is wealthy and noble, you disgrace us all by that shameless meeting. Give me the letter, I say.'

In his rage he caught her by the arms, and she struggled with him and fell upon her knees at his feet.

'Am I to use force?' he cried.

'For your own sake, no. Father, the letter is not what you think. For your own peace of mind, let it stay.'

His hands dropped to his sides at his daughter's wild appeal, and the convulsed angry look once more gave place to the one of dread, as he drew back a step.

'Tell me,' he cried, still hesitating, 'is it from that libertine, Sir Harry Payne?'

'No, no!'

'From Rockley?'

'No, father. How can you think me so degraded—so low!'

'Then—then——'

'Father, for pity's sake!' she cried, as she crept to his knees and embraced them. 'Can you not see how I am willing to bear everything to save you pain? Has there not been agony and suffering enough in this house? You cannot think—you cannot believe. Is it not better that we should let this rest?'

He raised his trembling hands to his lips in a nervous, excited way, looking searchingly and furtively by turns in his child's piteous face. The rage in his own had died out, to give place to the look of terror; and, as Claire clung to him, he now and again glanced at the door, as if he would flee from her presence.

'No, no,' he said at last. 'I was wrong. I will not see the letter. You have your secrets: I have mine. Claire, my child, there is a veil, drawn down by you, over that night's work. I dare not lift it, I dare not look.'

'Once more, father,' she said, 'had we not better let it

rest? I am content; I make no murmur against my fate.'

'No,' he said, flashing out again into anger; 'but—hush! —stop!—I must not,' he whispered hoarsely. 'These strange fits. I cannot bear them.'

He threw back and shook his head excitedly.

'I should go mad—I should go mad.'

'Father!'

'There, I am calm again, my child. I am not myself sometimes. There—there—it is past.'

He bent over and raised her to his breast, where she laid her head, uttering a piteous sigh.

'Stricken,' he whispered; 'stricken, my child. The workings of a terrible fate. Don't reproach—don't think ill of me, Claire. Some day the light may come—no, no,' he cried wildly; 'better the darkness. I am so weak—so torn by the agony I have endured. So weak, so pitiful a man; but, with all this wretched vanity and struggle for place, my miserable heart has been so full of love for you all—for my little May.'

Claire shivered.

'No, no,' he cried excitedly. 'Claire, my child, don't speak. Hush! listen, my child. There have been cases where, in self-abnegation—the sins of others—have been borne—by the innocent—the innocent! Oh, my child, my child!'

His head dropped upon his daughter's shoulder, and he burst into a fit of sobbing, the outpourings of a flood of anguish that he fought vainly to restrain.

'Father, dear father!' she whispered, as her arms tightened around him.

'Claire, my child—my child!'

'Yes,' she said, as she seemed to be growing stronger and more firm; 'your child—not your judge. Father, I see my duty clearly now. Your help and comfort to the end.'

## CHAPTER XIX.

### PEACE AND SYMPATHY.

'And I thought that there would be no more rest and comfort here, my child. Claire, one night——'

'No, no, dearest,' she cried, as she laid her soft white hand upon his lips; 'the past cannot be recalled.'

'Only this little revelation,' he said, as he kissed the soft hand and held it to his cheek, 'then the past shall be as dead with us. One night—since that night—I said to myself that I could bear no more, and I locked myself in my room; but something seemed to stay my hand—a something seemed to bid me live on, even in my pitiful, degraded state; and always—I cannot tell you how—your face seemed to be before my eyes. I tried to put it from me, but it was there. I fought against it, for I was enraged with you one minute, trembling with dread of what I dare not see the next; but still your face seemed to be there, my child, and I said at last that I would live it down or face it,

if the dread time that haunts me always, as if lying in my path, should at last leap out.'

'Father!'

'My child! There, there; we do not know how much we can bear until the burden is laid upon us; and now let us cleave together like soldiers in the battle of life. Claire, child, we must live.'

She sat holding his hand in hers, with her brow knit, and a far-off look in her eyes.

'I am so old and broken,' he said musingly; 'so helpless. For so many years my miserable energies have been bent solely to this pitiful life, or I would say let us leave here at once, and go where we are not known, to live in some simple fashion; but — I know nothing. I cannot work.'

'But I can, father,' she said, with a look of elation in her eyes. 'I am young and strong, and I will work for you as you have worked for me. Let us go.'

'Where, my child?' he said, as he kissed her hand tenderly. 'What work would you do—you, so beautiful, so unfit for the rough toil of life?'

'As a teacher—a governess,' she cried; but he shook his head, and began to tremble and draw her closer to him.

'No, no,' he said excitedly; 'that would mean separation; and Claire,' he whispered, 'I am so weak—so broken

—that I must have your young spirit to sustain me. I cannot live without you. Left alone—no, no, no, I dare not be left alone.'

'Hush, dear!' she said, laying her cheek upon his shoulder, and drawing him to her breast, to soothe the agony of dread from which he suffered. 'I will not leave you, then, father, I will be your help and stay. Nothing shall separate us now.'

'No, no.' He whispered the words. 'I could not live without you, Claire, and I dare not die. My miserable, useless life may prove useful yet. Yes, my child, I feel it—I know it. My work is not yet done. Claire, my course is marked out for me; we must stay here till then.'

'Till then, father?'

'Yes; and live it down. Yes, I am wanted here. You will help me?'

'Father, I am your child.'

'Yes, yes,' he cried, resuming his old flippant air so suddenly that Claire, who did not realize the reaction that had set in, gazed at him tremblingly. 'I shall live it down as of old. We must begin again, my dear, and those miserable, brainless butterflies will soon forget, and come to me for my help and introductions. We must not leave here, and the old fees will come once more.'

Claire sighed.

'Yes, child, it would have been a happier life to have gone; but it is braver to stay. Let your sweet face show in its dignity how lightly you treat all slander and scandal. Some day, after all, you shall marry well.'

She did not reply, and he went on excitedly:

'Now let me see what friends we have left. The Barclays stand firm as rocks. Those Deans, too—so vulgar, but quite as friendly as before. Mrs. Pontardent.'

'Mrs. Pontardent, father?'

'Yes, my dear, yes. Among so few, we must not be choosers. Remember old Hobson, you know. I know nothing against her but her tables. They gamble high; but where do they not? She has arranged for an evening, and I have promised her to go and take the management, and help her to receive her visitors—and—er—and——'

'She has asked you to bring me?'

'Yes. How did you know?'

'I could read it in your eyes, father,' said Claire. 'Oh, it is impossible.'

'I will not press you, my child; but it is almost life to me, and it would be giving us a stepping-stone to recover our lost ground.'

'Do you wish me to go, father?'

'If—if—you would not mind very much, my dear,' he said hesitatingly. 'It would be helping me.'

He kissed her hand and left her to her own thoughts.

The tears flowed for awhile, and then, with a sigh, Claire rose with a look of resignation on her countenance, as if she accepted her fate.

## CHAPTER XX.

### PRIVATE INSTRUCTIONS.

'Look here, Bell,' said Major Rockley, as he stood in his quarters, with his regimental servant before him; 'you were drunk again last night?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then you are not ashamed of it?'

'Yes, sir, very much ashamed of it. It's my weakness, sir.'

'Weakness, you scoundrel? It's your blackguardly conduct. You have been under arrest so many times for this disgraceful behaviour, and I have such a black list against you, that if I lay it before Colonel Lascelles he will have you flogged.'

'But you won't do that, sir.'

'Yes, I will, you scoundrel. No: I'll give you another chance.'

'Thank you, sir; I was sure you would,' said the young man, flushing slightly, and with a strange look in his face.

'By the way, what time did Mr. Denville come back to his quarters?'

'Two o'clock, sir.'

'With whom had he been?'

'Sir Matthew Bray, sir. Lady Drelincourt's, I think.'

'Humph! Now, look here; can I trust you, Bell?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then I'm going to give you a delicate bit of business to do for me.'

'Yes, sir.'

'If you do it well, I shall give you a clean slate to begin again, and wipe off that last report.'

'Thankye, sir.'

'I cannot—at least I do not wish to—be seen in the business preparations, so I trust to you.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Go directly then, to Moggridge's, and arrange for a post-chaise and four to be at Prince's Road to-night at—say eleven—no; half-past ten.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Pick good fast horses. Pack a light valise with a change; put my pistols in the pockets of the carriage, and you will be there ready to see me off. You understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'There's—well, to be plain with you—a lady in the case.'

'I see, sir.

'And, mind this; after we have started, you stay behind, and if there is any inquiry directly after, you volunteer information, and say we have taken the London Road. You understand?'

'Quite, sir.'

'There's a sovereign for you. No: you'll get drunk if I give it you now. I'll give you five when I come back.'

'Very good, sir.'

'And mind, if I am wanted, I am unwell in bed. I want a good start.'

'I see, sir. You may depend on me. But what house, sir, in Prince's Road?'

'You'll see, blockhead. The one that is lighted up. Mrs. Pontardent's.'

Major Rockley's regimental servant saluted, turned upon his heel, and went out muttering 'Scoundrel!' between his teeth. 'I wonder who the lady is?'

'I wouldn't change places with you, my fine fellow,' he muttered, as he went across the parade ground; and, turning a corner, he came suddenly upon Sir Harry Payne, Sir Matthew Bray, and the new cornet, who flushed scarlet, as he saw the dragoon.

James Bell saluted, and was passing, but Sir Harry Payne stopped him, and Cornet Denville said hastily:

'I've left my cigar-case. Join you directly.'

He went away quickly, and Sir Harry Payne said:

'Where are you going, Bell?'

'Major's washerwoman, sir,' said the dragoon promptly.

'Then you can call at River's for me. Half a dozen pairs of white kid gloves. He knows my size. Shall he get you some, Matt?'

'No; not going.'

'Isn't she going?'

'No.'

'Never mind; you'd better come. Denville's pretty sister will be there.'

'Phew! Will she?' said Sir Matthew, whistling. 'I say, mind what you're about. There may be a row.'

'Not there. I shan't notice her; and if I did, Denville's all right. We're the best of friends now.'

'But are you sure she's coming?'

'Pontardent told me herself. She came round the old man.'

'Then I will come. Order me some gloves, Harry. I've no change.'

'You never do have any. Here! Tell them to send half a dozen pairs for Sir Matthew, and put them down to me. What's the matter with your lip?'

'My lip, sir?'

'Yes; it's bleeding.'

'Cracked, sir.'

'Yes: fevered. Drink too much. That will do. Nines, or tens—the gloves?'

'No, no: eights,' cried Sir Matthew; and the dragoon went on out of the barrack gates, with his face growing grey.

'This is being a soldier,' he muttered. 'The scoundrel! If I thrash him till he can't move, they'll shoot me. But no, it can't be. She's too good a girl. Impossible. Besides, I shall be there.'

He went straight to the livery-stable keeper, and arranged for the best four horses he had, and gave the man a hint.

'Very private, you know.'

'Right, my lad. I know what the Major is. Here's half-a-crown for you to get a glass.'

'Thank ye.'

James Bell pocketed the coin, and went off back to pack his master's valise, and load the case of pistols ready to take to the chaise in the evening, after which he went to have one half-pint of ale, for he was suffering from a severe sensation of thirst, one that he often felt come on.

'Just one glass,' he said. 'That's all.'

James Bell partook of his one glass, but it was not all. Then he went back to see to the horses in his charge in a stable near the barracks—two belonging to the Major, and one of the Colonel's.

The helper was there, and as the extra work would fall to his share that night, there was an excuse for giving him a glass of ale, of which he partook, nothing loth.

The message of Sir Harry Payne had been given, the clothes were packed up, the pistols ready. Yes, everything had been done; and at last, when it was getting dark, James Bell, looking very stern and determined, and with a tendency to walk extremely straight, as if he were aiming at something right ahead, went off to Moggridge's, placed the packed valise under the seat of the post-chaise, the pistols in the pockets, and then had a chat with the post-boys, and —a glass of ale.

There was an hour yet to the time, so he strolled to the end of the yard, and thought he would just go as far as the stables to see if the helper had properly bedded down the horses; and this proving to be the case, and a shilling still remaining unspent of that half-crown, the dragoon suggested that a pot of the best ale should be fetched, and that they should drink it before he went.

The helper was worthy of his title, and fetched the ale, and then, one seated on a truss of straw, the other upon the corn-bin, the two men finished the ale between them, and just at the time that James Bell should have been at Mrs. Pontardent's gate, he was fast asleep in the stable.

That afternoon Mr. Barclay was busy with his partner,

when a visitor was announced, and as it was probably a call relating to money matters, Mrs. Barclay left the room.

'Oh, it's you, Moggridge,' said Barclay gruffly. 'You don't want money, I'm sure.'

'Thank ye, no, Mr. Barclay, sir,' said the visitor, a closely shaven, sharp-faced man, with bow legs. 'Things is moving, sir. I'm doing tidy;' and he went on chewing a piece of clover hay, which he had between his lips.

'What do you want then?'

'Well, you know what you said, sir, after the Hon. Tom Badgley went off that night, and dodged the sheriff's officers; and you know what I promised you.'

'Who's going now?'

'Major Rockley, sir.'

'The deuce! Alone?'

'No, sir. I think there's a lady in the case.'

'Who?'

'Don't know, sir. Take up at Mrs. Pontardent's party; half arter ten.'

'Thank ye, Moggridge. What'll you take?'

'Well, sir, champagne's a thing as don't often come in my way, and——'

'Come along,' said Barclay, and Mr. Moggridge's desires were satisfied.

'Not a bolt!' said Barclay to himself. 'Who's he

woman? Well, I don't want him to go. If he goes off he won't meet my bill. He must be stopped, but how?'

He stood thinking for a few minutes, and then sat down and wrote a letter which he took out, and picking a boy from the idlers on the cliff, sent it to its destination.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### A WALK AND A DRIVE.

Richard Linnell found a good deal of relief in his restless state of mind in taking long country walks, telling himself that he got away from his thoughts; but, on the contrary, he thought the more, and enjoyed his misery as some young men do whose love affairs go crooked.

He was about nine miles away from Saltinville on the day of Mrs. Pontardent's party, and rapidly increasing the distance, when he suddenly became aware of the sound of wheels behind in the road, and looking round as he gave place to the driver, he found that Cora Dean was checking her ponies.

'Confound her! she has followed me,' he said to himself, as she drew up by his side, quite alone, for the little seat generally occupied by the boy-groom was turned over and closed.

'This is unexpected, Mr. Linnell,' she said, holding out her gloved hand. 'I thought you were at home.'

'I felt sure you were,' he said, smiling.

'Why?'

The question was accompanied by a half resentful, half tender look, the first intended, the latter not.

'I expected that you would be busy with hair-dressers and dressmakers, preparing for to-night's battle.'

'To-night's battle?'

'Yes,' he said, in a bantering, reckless way that was new to him, 'the battle with the beaux whom you are going to slay.'

He felt as if he could have bitten his tongue off the next moment, as he saw the look of pain she gave him.

'What have I done?' she said in a soft, low, half-passionate tone.

'Done! What do you mean?'

'Why do you take pleasure in laughing at me and mocking me?'

'Oh, nonsense!' he cried. 'I was only speaking lightly.'

'Why should you speak lightly to me?' she said. 'We have lived in the same house now for over a year, and, instead of being neighbours and friends, there always seems to be a great gap between us.'

'Why, what a sentimental view you take of things,' he said. 'We shake hands when we meet. We smile at one another, and nod and chat.'

'Yes,' she said sadly, 'we shake hands, we smile at each other, we nod and chat, but——'

She stopped and seemed to try and command herself; and, to his great relief, she spoke lightly as she said:

'I shall see you to-night, of course?'

'No; I thought you were going to a party.'

'Yes, but you will be there?'

'No,' he said gravely; 'I am not going.'

'Not going!' she cried. 'Why, you were asked.'

'How do you know?'

She turned crimson, and avoided his searching look.

'Did Mrs. Pontardent tell you?'

'Yes, and you will go?'

'No,' he said; 'I declined. Why was I asked—do you know?'

She darted an appealing look at him; and the haughty, self-assertive woman seemed to be completely changed.

'Don't—don't be angry with me,' she said. 'I—I thought it would be so pleasant if you were going to be there.'

'You never asked that woman to invite me, Miss Dean?'

She did not speak, but her face began to work, her hands dropped in her lap, her head drooped upon her chest, and she wept bitterly.

'Oh, Miss Dean, for heaven's sake don't do that,' he said. 'I hate to see a woman cry. I can't bear it. Pray forgive

me if I spoke harshly. I could not help feeling annoyed that you should have done this.'

'You ought to be grateful,' she cried passionately. 'The woman you love so dearly will be there with gay Major Rockley——oh, Mr. Linnell—Richard—for heaven's sake forgive me. What have I said—what have I done?'

In her alarm at the start he gave, and at his ghastly face, she let fall the reins and caught at his arm, when the ponies, feeling their heads free, dashed off; but this brought Linnell back to the present, and with one bound he reached the rein, hung on to it, and was dragged along for a few yards, turning the ponies' heads towards a steep bank by the side of the narrow unfrequented road. The result would have been that he would have been crushed between the chaise and the bank, but for Cora's presence of mind in seizing the other rein and dragging at it with all her might.

As it was, he received a violent kick which turned him sick and faint, and when he came to, the ponies' reins were secured to a tree in the hedge, and he was lying upon the grass, with Cora's arm supporting his head, and her frightened face bending over him.

'What is it?' he cried sharply. 'Are you hurt?'

'No,' she said softly. 'Don't move. How brave you are!'

He looked at her wonderingly, and then flushing once more, he recalled the whole scene, and what led to it.

'I was afraid you were hurt,' he said, trying to rise; but the giddy feeling came back, and he sank down again.

'You are hurt,' she cried. 'What shall I do? Richard—dear Richard! He's dying. Oh, my love—my love!'

'Hush!' he cried huskily, as she was raising his head in her arms; 'for God's sake don't speak to me like that. There—there—you see I am better. The pony kicked me. It made my head swim. There,' he cried, rising to his knees, 'you see it is all right. I quite frightened you.'

He stood up now and offered her his hand to rise; but she did not take it, for she covered her face with her hands and crouched lower and lower on her knees, sobbing wildly in a passion of grief, for his words had been as cold and distant as if they had been strangers.

'Miss Dean—Miss Dean—pray let me help you to your carriage,' he said; but she shrank from him.

'Don't touch me!' she cried bitterly; 'you made me love you—you made me disgrace myself like this, and now I am to be your laughing-stock and scorn.' She looked up at him with her eyes full of rage, which died out on the instant as she cried to him wildly, 'I wish you had let me drown!'

He stood looking at her for a few moments, and then glanced along the winding lane; but they were quite alone. Then, taking her hand, he made her rise, for she submitted to his will without a trace of resistance.

I am very sorry,' he said at last simply.

'Sorry!' she cried angrily. 'Oh, why am I such a mad fool? Why did I betray myself like this?'

'Hush!' he said softly, as he held her hand between both of his; 'listen to me. Do you think I have not seen for long enough that you are beautiful, and that——'

'How dare you?' she cried fiercely. 'It is not true.'

'You must hear me,' he said; 'and forgive my awkwardness for speaking as I do. You know my story so well: have I not always been steadfast to that love?'

She sobbed violently and tried to snatch away her hand, but he held it firmly.

'I have always tried to be to you as a friend. Heaven knows I would not have wounded you like this.'

'Yes,' she sobbed bitterly, 'Heaven knows.'

'Why did you stab me with those cruel words?' he cried resentfully.

'I don't know,' she wailed. 'I was mad. It makes me mad to see you go on worshipping her as you do. Does she make you love and hate her too, as she does me?'

'Hush—hush!' he said quickly. 'I want to like and respect you, Cora Dean.'

'Like! Respect!' she cried, with a flash of her former rage. 'Why have I degraded myself like this?'

'Do you not trust me?' he said gently, as he looked in her eyes. Do you think I should be such a despicable coward

as ever to whisper word of this to a soul? Come,' he said, with a frank smile, 'we have both been unfortunate. Let us be friends.'

'Friends?' she cried. 'No; a woman never forgives a slight like this. Do you think I could?'

'Yes,' he said, after a few moments' pause. 'You hate me, and are bitter against me now; but when you have grown calm you will respect me, I am sure. Cora,' he cried, with an outburst as excited as her own, 'there is no such thing as love or truth on earth. I——Bah! What am I saying?' he cried, checking himself. 'Come, we are friends. Let me help you to your place again.'

He offered his hand once more, but she struck it aside, and went to the ponies' heads while he tried to forestall her, but had to catch at the side of the chaise to save himself a fall.

Her anger was gone on the instant as she saw his face contract with pain, and in a moment she was by his side.

'It is my turn to triumph,' she said in a deep, low tone. 'Richard Linnell, you must trust to the woman you despise I shall have to drive you home.'

He tried to master the pain, but he could not; and, with a deprecating smile, he had to confess his weakness, and accept a seat back to Saltinville, for it was impossible to walk.

It was a triumph, Cora Dean saw, as she sat up proud

and stately beside him; and she felt her heart glow as they reached the town, and scores of promenaders noted him seated by her side; but it was not a pleasant drive home, all the same.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### LINNELL CHANGES HIS MIND.

'GETTING cured then, Dick?' said Colonel Mellersh grimly, as Richard limped into the room after finding a note in his own place, which his father said had been brought by a boy.

'Cured? Look, I am quite lame. One of Miss Dean's ponies kicked me; but it will only be a bruise.'

'Humph! How convenient!' said the Colonel, with a grim look.

'Don't laugh at me,' said Linnell quickly. 'I could not help myself.'

'That's what we all say when we fall victims to fascination.'

'Mellersh, pray stop this banter. You refused Mrs. Pontardent's invitation for yourself and me?'

'I did.'

'I want you to ask her pardon, and get the invitations for us. I must get there to-night.'

'Because Miss Cora Dean, your beautiful charioteer, will be there?'

'No!' fiercely.

'Why, then, most impressionable youth?'

'Because—must I tell you?'

'Yes, if you wish me to act,' said the Colonel sternly.

'Because Claire Denville will be there.'

'Good heavens! that old fop is never going to take that girl?'

'He is.'

'Pooh! What am I saying?' cried the Colonel, half laughingly. 'Well, what of it? Why do you want to go?'

'Look.'

Linnell held out the note he had found in his room, and Mellersh read it.

'Rockley—post-horses—for the London Road. Who sent this, Dick?'

'I don't know.'

'It may be a trick.'

'Who would trick me like that? And what for?'

Mellersh remained silent for a few minutes, and then he said gravely:

'Well, Dick, suppose it is so. Surely you are going to awake from this madness now?'

'What do you mean?'

'What does this letter mean? It is plain enough. Constant sapping has carried the fortress, and the lady has consented.'

'Don't talk like that, Mellersh. For heaven's sake, don't take that cynical tone.'

'Why not, madman? I have heard tell that women often say no when they mean yes. A lady we know must have meant yes. Hang it, boy, what more proof do you want that the woman is unworthy of your love?'

'None,' said Linnell bitterly; 'none, but I love her all the same.'

'Nonsense! Be a man.'

'I am a man,' cried Linnell furiously, 'too much of a man to see the woman I love suffer for her weakness when I can stretch out a hand to save her. That hand I can stretch out, and I will. Now, will you help me?'

'To the death, Dick. I abhor your folly, but there is so much true chivalry in it that I'll help you with all my heart.'

'I knew you would,' cried Linnell excitedly. 'Write at once and get the invitations.'

'Pish!' said Mellersh contemptuously. 'Don't trouble yourself, my boy. I have only to walk in at Madame Pontardent's door with any friend I like to take. Ah, I wonder how many hundred pounds I have won in that house!'

Linnell was walking up and down the room when the strains of music heard across the hall ceased; and directly after old Mr. Linnell's pleasant, grave head was thrust into the room.

'Another letter for you, Dick, my son. Just come.'

He held it out, nodded to both, and went back to his room, when the violin was heard again.

'Strange hand,' said Richard, opening it quickly.

'Good God!'

'What's the matter?' cried Richard, as he heard his friend's exclamation—saw his start.

'What has Miss Clode to say to you?' said Mellersh huskily.

'Miss Clode? This is not from Miss Clode. Look—no, I cannot show you,' cried Richard excitedly. 'Yes, I will; I keep nothing from you.'

Mellersh glanced at the note which had been delivered by hand. It was anonymous, and only contained these words:

'If Mr. Richard Linnell wishes for further proof of the unworthiness of a certain lady, let him visit Mrs. Pontardent's to-night.'

'That cannot be from Miss Clode,' said Richard, as he saw his friend's face resume its cynical calm.

'Possibly not. Of course not. Why should she write to you? Well, Dick, we'll go and see the affair to-night; but what do you mean to do?'

'Act according to circumstances. At any rate stop this wretched business.'

'Good,' said Mellersh. 'I'm with you, Dick; but if it comes to a meeting this time, let me take the initiative. I

should like to stand in front of Rockley some morning. The man irritates me, and I am in his debt.'

'What, money?'

'No; I want to pay back a few insults thrown at me over the tables now and then.'

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### AN EXACTING GUEST.

Mrs. Pontardent was a lady of a class who prospered well in the days when George the Third was king, and fashionable men considered it the correct thing to ruin themselves at cards wherever the tables were opened for the purpose. If you go to an auction sale now, in out-of-the-way places, there are sure to be card-tables in the catalogue; but if you furnish newly, your eyes rarely light upon green baize-lined tables exhibited for sale.

There were several at Mrs. Pontardent's handsomely-furnished detached house in Prince's Road, where it stood back in fairly extensive grounds. In fact, it was, after Lord Carboro's, one of the best houses close to Saltinville.

There were plenty of carriages waiting about in the road that night—so many along by the garden wall that Major Rockley found it necessary to alter his plans, for a post-chaise and four was likely to attract attention, and its post-boys might be the objects of a good deal of ribald jest if

they were close up with the servants of the private carriages.

To meet this difficulty, not being able to find his servant, he went round himself to the livery stables, feed the post-boys, and gave them instructions to wait in the back lane close by the door in the wall at the north side of the garden.

That door was only unlocked when the gardener was receiving fresh soil, plants or pots, or found it necessary to go out for a quiet refresher in the heat of the day ; but after an interview and the offer of a golden key, the gardener thought it possible that the door might be left open that night.

Mrs. Pontardent lived in style, and her rooms deserved the title of saloons, draped as they were with amber satin, and bright with wax candles, whose light was reflected from many girandoles.

The drawing-room windows opened on to a well-kept lawn ; there were bosky walks ; a terrace from which the glittering sea was visible ; and in the saloons and about the garden a large and brilliant company was assembled.

The Barclays were there, for Barclay was everybody's banker, and a necessity. The Deans arrived early, and Cora looked handsomer than ever. In fact, the officers of the dragoon regiment, as they saw her go up and speak to Claire, declared that they were the most perfect blonde and brunette that the world had ever seen. But then Mrs.

Pontardent's wines were excellent, and it was acknowledged that it was a guest's own fault if he did not have enough.

Tea, coffee, ices, and sandwiches at various buffets were spread as a matter of course, but the servants who waited there had a light time compared with that of the butler and his aid.

The Master of the Ceremonies had arrived early with his daughter, whom Mrs. Pontardent kissed affectionately, and called 'My dear child,' and then her father was obliged to leave her, as he had so many duties to perform, receiving guests and introducing them to the hostess as if it were a royal ball; getting couples ready for the dances that went on to the strains of a string band in a very languid way, and finding places for elderly ladies at the card-tables, as opportunity served.

As soon as she could, Claire found a refuge by the side of Mrs. Barclay; but her hand was much sought after by dancers brought up from time to time by her father, and every time she trembled lest one of those present should offer himself as a partner.

But, though Major Rockley was there, and had spoken to her gravely once, and bowed on two other occasions as he passed her, he had made no other advance; and when Richard Linnell arrived he did not attempt to speak, but passed her arm-in-arm with Colonel Mellersh, bowing coldly, and giving her one stern, severe look that made her draw

her breath once with a catch, and then feel a glow of resentment.

Cora came and sat down once by her side, to be by turns loving and spiteful, as if her temper was not under command; but they were soon separated, for Cora's hand was also much sought after for the various dances.

The evening was less trying than Claire had anticipated. She had come prepared to meet with several slights from the ladies present, but, somehow, the only one who openly treated her with discourtesy was Lady Drelincourt, who gave her the cut direct in a most offensive way, as she passed on Morton Denville's arm.

That was the unkindest act of all, for the boy had seen her, and was about to nod and smile, forgetful in the elation produced by several glasses of wine, of the cause of offence between them; but, taking his cue from the lady on his arm, he drew himself up stiffly and passed on.

The tears rose to Claire's eyes, but she mastered her emotion, as she saw Major Rockley on the other side of the room, keenly observant of all that had passed; and to hide her grief she went on talking to the gentleman who had just solicited her hand for the next dance.

Richard Linnell passed her soon afterwards with Cora upon his arm, and a jealous pang shot through her; but it passed away, and she resigned herself to her position, as if she had suffered so many pangs of late that her senses were

growing blunted, and suffering was becoming easier to her.

Morton Denville was dismissed soon after in favour of Sir Matthew Bray; and, in his boy-like excitement, looked elated one moment as the half-fledged officer of dragoons, annoyed and self-conscious the next, as he kept seeing his father bowing and mincing about the rooms, or caught sight of his sister, whom he shunned.

It was a miserable evening, he thought, and he wished he had not come.

Then he wondered whether he looked well, for he fancied that the Adjutant had smiled at him.

A minute later he was thinking that he was thoroughly enjoying himself, and this enjoyment he found in a glass of Mrs. Pontardent's champagne.

The dancing went on; so did the flirting in the saloons and in the garden, which was brilliant in front of the windows, deliciously dark and love-inspiring down the shady walks, for there the strains of the band came in a sweetly subdued murmur that the young officers declared was intoxicating, a charge that was misapplied.

The play grew higher as the night wore on, the conversation and laughter louder, the dancing more spirited, and the party was at its height when Mrs. Pontardent, in obedience to an oft-repeated look from Major Rockley, walked up to him slowly, and took his arm.

'My dear Major: what a look!' she said banteringly. 'You met the handsome youth, and you shot him. After that you ought to be friends, whereas I saw you exchange a look with poor Mr. Linnell that was only excelled by the one you gave Colonel Mellersh.'

'D—— Colonel Mellersh!' said Rockley savagely.

'By all means,' said the lady mockingly; 'but not in my presence, please.'

'Don't talk twaddle,' exclaimed Rockley, as they passed out of the drawing-room window and across the lawn.

It so happened that Cora Dean had been dancing with a handsome young resident of the place, and, after the dance, he had begged her to take a stroll with him out in the grounds.

'No, no,' she said, amused by the impression made upon his susceptible nature; 'that means taking cold.'

'I assure you, no,' he exclaimed rather thickly. 'It's warm and delightful outside. Just one walk round.'

She was about to decline, when she caught Richard Linnell's eyes fixed upon her and her companion, and, urged by a feeling of coquetry, and a desire to try and move him to speak to her, if it were only to reproach, she took the offered arm, and, throwing a lace scarf over her head, allowed her partner to lead where he would, and that was naturally down one of the darkest grass alleys of the grounds.

'Do you know, Miss Dean,' he began thickly, 'I never saw a girl in all my life who——'

'Can we see the sea from the grounds here?' said Cora.

'Yes; lovely view,' he said. 'Down here;' and he led her farther from the house. 'There, you can see the sea from here, but who would wish to see the sea when he could gaze into the lovely eyes of the most——'

'Is not that an arbour?' said Cora, as they stood now in one of the darkest parts of the garden.

'Yes. Let's sit down and have a talk, and——'

'Will you lead the way?' said Cora.

'Yes; give me your hand—eh—why—what dooce! She's given me the slip. Oh, 'pon my soul, I'll pay her for that.'

He started back towards the house, passing close by Cora, who had merely stepped behind a laurustinus, and who now went in the other direction, along a grass path at the back of the lawn.

Her white satin slippers made not the slightest sound, and she was about to walk straight across the lawn and out into the light, when a low, deep murmur reached her ear, and she recognised the voice.

'Major Rockley,' she said to herself. 'Who is he with?'

Her jealous heart at once whispered 'Claire!'

'If I could but bring Richard face to face with them now!' she thought, 'he would turn to me after all.'

She hesitated, for the thought of the act being dishonourable struck her; but in her mental state, and with her

defective education, she was not disposed to yield to fine notions of social honour; and, with her heart beating fast, she hurried softly along the grass, to find herself well within hearing of the speakers.

The words she heard were not those of love, for they were uttered more in anger. It was at times quite a quarrel changing to the tone of ordinary conversation.

Cora glanced behind her, to see the brightly lit-up house and hear the strains of music and the sounds of laughter and lively remark, while, by contrast with the glow in that direction, the bushes amid which she stood and into which she peered seemed to be the more obscure.

There was a pause, and then a woman's voice said quickly:

'No, no; I cannot. You must not ask me, indeed.'

A curious feeling of disappointment came over Cora, for her plan was crushed on the instant. What were other people's love affairs to her?

She was turning away with disgust, when the deep voice of the Major said quickly, and in a menacing way which rooted the listener to the spot:

'But I say you shall. One word from me, and you might have to leave Saltinville for good. I mean for your own good.'

'Oh, Rockley!'

'I don't care; you make me mad. Here have I done you endless little services, helped you to live in the style

you do; and the first little favour I ask of you, I am met with a flat refusal.'

'I don't like to refuse you, but the girl is——'

'Well, you know what the girl is. Hang it all, Pont, should I ask you if it were not as I say—unless it were that rich heiress I am to carry off some day.'

'And the sooner the better.'

'Yes, yes; but time's going. It's now eleven, and I must strike while the iron's hot.'

'But, Rockley——'

'More opposition? What the devil do you mean?'

'I don't like to be mixed up with such an affair.'

'You will not be mixed up with it. No one will know but our two selves.'

'My conscience goes against such a trap.'

'Your conscience!' he hissed angrily.

'Well, and do you suppose I have none? The girl is too good. I like her. It is a shame, Rockley.'

Cora Dean's heart beat as if it would suffocate her, while her mouth felt dry and her hands moist. She could hardly have moved to save her life. She knew what it was, she felt sure. It was a plot against Claire, and if it were——

Cora Dean did not finish her thought, but listened as Rockley spoke again.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### TOO LATE.

'How long has the fair Pontardent taken to the nursing up of scruples?'

'Do you suppose a woman is all evil?' was the retort. 'You men make us bad enough, but you cannot kill all the good. I say it is a shame.'

'A shame!' said Rockley derisively. 'Ha, ha, ha! What a woman you are! You don't know what has taken place. I tell you this; she is mine. All she wants is the excuse and opportunity that she finds to-night with me. The old man watches her like a hawk.'

'Is this really so, Rockley?'

'On my honour. I should not have done what I have if she were not willing. I've a chaise and four waiting outside the lower gate behind here.'

'You have?'

'It has been there this half hour, and we are only waiting for our opportunity. Now then, will you help me?'

'Well,' said Mrs. Pontardent hesitating, 'if it is that——'

'It is like that, I tell you; but she wants it to appear that she had no hand in it, to keep up the fiction. You see?'

'Yes,' said the woman rather hoarsely; 'but I don't like it, Rockley.'

'Friends or enemies?—one word?' he said sternly.

'Friends,' she said quickly. 'What am I to do?'

'Go back at once, and get hold of young Denville. He's half tipsy somewhere.'

'Yes.'

'Tell him he has shamefully neglected his sister, and that he is to take her out in the garden for a walk straight down the broad grass path, and beg her pardon.'

'But——'

'Not a word. Do what I say. The boy will obey you like a sheep dog.'

'And then?'

'What then? That is all.'

'But, Rockley, no violence.'

'Bah! Rubbish! Do as I bid you. I shall push the boy into a bush; that's all.'

There was a dead silence.

'Must I do this, Rockley?'

'Yes, you must. Go at once. You shall not be mixed

in the affair at all. No one can blame you, for the boy is too tipsy to recollect anything to-morrow. Now go.'

There was a rustle of a dress, and Cora had just time to draw out of sight as Mrs. Pontardent passed her.

Cora heard her voice as she went by. It was almost like a sigh, but the words were articulate, and they were:

'God forgive me! It is too bad.'

What to do?

Cora stood motionless, her pulses beating furiously, and the blood surging to her brain, and seeming to keep her from thinking out some plan.

Major Rockley—the cruel, insolent libertine—had a post-chaise waiting; by a trick Claire was to be got out, and down the broad walk, led like a sheep to the slaughter by her weak, half-tipsy brother, and then carried off. The plan seemed to Cora devilish in its cunning, and the flush of her ardent blood intoxicated her with a strange feeling of excitement—a wild kind of joy.

It was all for her. Claire away—carried off, or eloped with Rockley, Richard Linnell would rage for a week, and then forget her. Poor fellow! How he had struggled to hide that limp, and how handsome he looked. How she loved him—her idol—who had saved her life. He would be hers now, hers alone, and there would be no handsome, sweet-voiced rival in the way to win him to think always of her

soft, grey, loving eyes—so gentle, so appealing in their gaze, that they seemed to be looking out of the darkness at her now.

Yes, there they were so firm and true—so softly appealing, and yet so full of womanly dignity that, as she hated her, so at the same time she loved.

'And in perhaps half an hour she would be away—on the road to London—in the Major's arms.'

'And Richard Linnell will be free to love me, and me alone?'

She said it aloud, and then tore at her throat, for a thought came that made the blood surge up and nearly suffocate her.

'Why, he would curse me if he knew, and loathe me to his dying day.'

She took a few hasty steps forward, and then staggered and stopped short.

'I must have been mad!' she panted. 'Am I so bad as that?'

She hurried towards the house, and narrowly missed her late partner as she reached one of the windows.

Thank heaven! she was not too late. There sat Claire where she had left her. No: it was some other lady.

She hurried in as quickly as she could without exciting notice.

Where was Claire?

She went from room to room, but she was not visible.

Where was Richard Linnell?

Nowhere to be seen.

If she could find Colonel Mellersh, or Mr. Barclay—but no; there was not a soul she knew, and from different parts of the room men were approaching her, evidently to ask her to dance.

She escaped into another saloon, and there was Denville.

She took a few steps towards him, but he hurried away as if to attend to a call from their hostess, who was smiling at the end of the room. The next moment Cora saw her take the arm of the Master of the Ceremonies and go through a farther door.

Impossible to speak to him now. It was as if Mrs. Pontardent had divined the reason of her coming, and was fighting against her with all her might.

Another gentleman approached, but she shrank away nervously, expecting each moment to see again her companion of the dark walk.

All at once, to her great joy, she caught sight of Mrs. Barclay, looking in colour like a full-blown cabbage-rose, and exhaling scent.

She hurried up to the plump pink dame, to be saluted with:

'Ah, my dear, how handsome you do look to-night!'

'Where's Claire Denville?' cried Cora huskily.

'Claire, my dear? Oh, she was with me ever so long, but she has just gone down the grounds.'

A spasm seemed to shoot through Cora Dean as she said to herself:

'Too late!'

## CHAPTER XXV.

### MELLERSH IS CONVINCED.

'Well, Dick,' said Mellersh, as he sought Linnell out, after a stroll round the rooms in search of Cora Dean, 'how long are you going to keep yourself on the gridiron?'

'I don't understand you.'

'Then I shall not try to explain.'

'Have you seen anything?'

'N—no.'

'Don't hesitate, man; you have?'

'No, Dick, no. Of course, I've seen a certain young lady, and I've seen Rockley hanging about.'

'Well, that proves nothing, does it?'

'My dear Dick, why should I waste my breath on a man in your condition?'

'My condition, you wretched old cynic? You never knew what it was to love.'

'Wrong. I have loved, and I am in love now.'

'You? You?'

'Yes, my boy, and with a woman who cares for somebody else; but I don't go stalking about like a tragedy hero, and rolling my eyes and cursing the whole world. If I cannot have the moon, I shall not cry for it.'

'Hist! There goes Rockley.'

'Well, let him go.'

Richard Linnell made no reply, but quietly followed the Major.

'I mustn't let them meet without me there,' thought Mellersh. 'The scoundrel might hit him badly next time.'

He strode off after Richard Linnell, but missed him, and it was quite half an hour before they met again.

'I have been about the gate,' said Richard hoarsely. 'There is no post-chaise there.'

'Then it is a hoax.'

'No; I cannot think that it is. Rockley is yonder, and he is watching about in a curious, restless way that means something.'

'Where is he?'

'Over there by the saloon window.'

'Oh, my dear Dick, I am hungry for a good hand at whist, and to win a little Philistine gold, and here you keep me hanging about after you, looking for a mare's nest.'

'I can't stop,' said Linnell. 'Where shall I find you if I want you?'

'Here, on this seat, under this bush, smoking a cigar. No; I'll stick by you, my lad.'

They went off together, and, going straight up to the window pointed out by Linnell, found that Rockley was not there.

'I left him there, I'll swear,' said Linnell savagely. 'No, don't let us separate; I may want you.'

'Quite right; and I may want you,' replied Mellersh.

They walked hastily round, looking in at window after window, but there was no sign of Rockley. The throng of guests were dancing, playing, or conversing, and the scene was very brilliant; but the tall, dark officer of the dragoons was the only one of his party that they could not see.

'Mellersh,' exclaimed Linnell suddenly, 'with all my watchfulness, I seem to have failed.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Claire!'

'Claire? Why, I saw her seated on that rout-chair five minutes ago.'

'Yes; but she has gone.'

'Quick, then—down to the gate! We must see them there.'

'Unless they have passed through,' said Linnell, with a groan. 'I ought not to have left the entrance.'

'Don't talk,' said Mellersh, almost savagely now, he seemed so moved from his ordinary calm. 'I don't want to think you are right, Dick, but I begin to be suspicious at last.'

They hurried down to the gate, where a knot of servants were chatting, the lights from the carriage-lamps glistening in polished panels and windows, and throwing up the gay liveries of the belaced footmen waiting.

'Has any one passed through here lately?' said Mellersh sharply.

'No, sir,' was chorused.

'Not a lady and gentleman?'

'No, sir—yes, about half an hour ago Colonel Lascelles and the doctor at the barracks went out together.'

'But no lady and gentleman separately or together?'

'No, sir.'

'No carriage?'

'No, sir,' said the footman who had acted as spokesman.

'Only wish they would,' grumbled a coachman from his box close by the gate.

'We are in time,' said Mellersh, and Linnell breathed more freely as he took up a position in the shade of a great clump of evergreens just inside the gate.

'Have you any plan?' said Mellersh, after a few minutes' waiting, during which time the servants, gathered in a knot, were at first quiet, as if resenting the presence of the two gentlemen. Then their conversation began again, and the watchers were forgotten.

'Plan? Yes,' said Linnell. 'I shall take her from him, and not leave her until she is in her father's care.'

'Humph! That means mischief, Dick.'

'Yes; for him, Mellersh. I shall end by killing that man.'

Mellersh was silent, and the minutes glided by.

'I can't bear this,' said Linnell at last. 'I feel as if there is something wrong—that he has succeeded in getting her away. Mellersh! man! why don't you speak? Here, come this way.'

Mellersh followed as his companion walked to the gate.

'Is there a servant of Mrs. Pontardent's here?'

'Yes, sir,' said a man holding a lantern, 'I am.'

'Is there any other entrance to these grounds?'

'No, sir,' said the man sharply, and Linnell's heart beat with joy. 'Leastwise, sir, only the garden gate.'

'Garden gate?'

'Yes, sir; at the bottom of the broad walk.'

'Here—which way?'

'Right up through the grounds, sir; or along outside here, till you come to the lane that goes round by the back. But it's always kept locked.'

'Stop here, Mellersh, while I go round and see,' whispered Linnell. 'If I shout, come to me.'

'Yes; go on. It is not likely.'

They went outside together, past the wondering group of servants, and then separating, Linnell was starting off when Mellersh ran to him.

'No blows, Dick,' he whispered, 'Be content with separating them.'

Linnell nodded, and was starting again when a man ran up out of the darkness, and caught Mellersh hastily by the arm.

'Seen a post-chaise about here, sir?'

'Post-chaise, my man?'

'Yes, sir—four horses—was to have been waiting hereabouts. Lower down. Haven't heard one pass?'

'No,' said Linnell quickly; 'but what post-chaise? Whose? Speak man!'

'Who are you?' said the man roughly.

'Never mind who I am,' cried Linnell. 'Tell me who was that post-chaise waiting for?'

The man shook him off with an oath, and was starting again on his search, when about fifty yards away there was the tramp of horses, the rattle and bump of wheels; and then, as by one consent, the three men ran towards the spot, they caught a faint glimpse of a yellow chaise turning into the main road; then there was the cracking of the post-boys' whips, and away it went over the hard road at a canter.

'Too late!' groaned the man, as he ran on, closely followed by Linnell and Mellersh.

'Too late!' groaned Linnell; but he ran on, passing the man, who raced after him, though, and for about a quarter

of a mile they kept almost together, till, panting with breathlessness and despair, and feeling the utter hopelessness of overtaking the chaise on foot, Linnell turned fiercely on the runner and grasped him by the throat.

'You scoundrel!' he panted. 'You knew of this. Who's in that chaise?'

'Curse you! don't stop me. Can't you see I'm too late?' cried the man savagely.

'Linnell! Are you mad?' cried Mellersh, coming up.

'Linnell!—are you Linnell?—Richard Linnell?' panted the man, ceasing his struggles.

'Yes. Who are you?'

'Don't waste time, man,' groaned the other. 'We must stop them at any cost. Did you see them go? Who is it Major Rockley has got there?'

'A lady we know,' said Mellersh quickly. 'Who are you?'

'The drunken fool and idiot who wanted to stop it,' groaned Bell. 'Here, Linnell,' he said, 'what are you going to do?'

'The man's drunk, and fooling us, Mellersh,' cried Linnell excitedly. 'Quick! Into the town and let's get a post-chaise. They are certain to take the London Road.'

'No,' cried Bell excitedly; 'he would make for Weymouth. Tell me this, though, gentlemen,' he cried, clinging to Linnell's arm. 'I am drunk, but I know what I am saying. For God's sake, speak: is it Claire Denville?'

'Who are you?' cried Mellersh sharply. 'Stand off, or I'll knock you down. It is the Major's man, Dick, and he's keeping us back to gain time. I didn't know him at first.'

'No: I swear I'm not,' cried the dragoon, in a voice so full of anguish, that they felt his words were true. 'Tell me, is it Miss Denville?'

'Yes.'

'Curse him! I'll have his life,' cried the man savagely. 'This way, quick!'

'What are you going to do?' cried Linnell, as Bell set off at a sharp run towards the main street of the town.

'Come with me and see.'

'No: I shall get a postchaise and four.'

'And give them an hour's start,' cried the dragoon. 'Horses, man, horses.'

'Where can we get them quickly?'

'In Major Rockley's stable, curse him!' was the reply.

In five minutes they were at the stable, and the dragoon threw open the door.

'Can you saddle a horse?' he panted, as they entered the place, dimly lit by a tallow candle in a swinging horn lantern.

'Yes—yes,' was the reply.

'Quick then. Everything's ready.'

Each ran to a horse, the head-stalls were cast loose, and the order of the well-appointed stable stood them in such good stead that, everything being at hand, in five minutes

the three horses were saddled and bridled, and being led out, champing their bits.

'We've no spurs. Where are the whips?'

'They want no whips,' cried the dragoon excitedly; 'a shake of the rein and a touch of the heel. They're chargers, gentlemen. Can you ride, Mr. Linnell?'

'Yes,' was the answer; and as it was given Linnell's foot was painfully raised to the stirrup.

He stopped though, and laid his hand upon the dragoon's shoulder.

'The London Road?' he said, looking him full in the eyes

'The Weymouth Road, I tell you.'

Another half minute and they were mounted and clattering down the lane to turn into the main street, up which the three sleek creatures pressed, hanging close together, and snorting, and rattling their bits as they increased their stride.

'Steady—steady—a carriage,' cried Mellersh; and they opened out to ride on either side of a chariot with flashing lamps, and as they passed they had a glimpse of Lady Drelincourt being escorted home from the party by Sir Matthew Bray.

'Steady!' cried Mellersh again, as they came in sight of the cluster of lamps and carriages by Mrs. Pontardent's gates; and but for his insistance there would have been a collision, for another carriage came out and passed them, the

wheel just brushing Linnell's leg in the road narrowed by a string of carriages drawn up to the path.

'Now we're clear,' said Mellersh; and they cantered by the wall, past the lane in which the chaise had been waiting, past a few more houses and the ragged outskirts, always mounting, and then bearing off to the left as the way curved, till there it lay, the broad chalk western road, open, hard, and ready to ring to their horses' beating hoofs.

'Now then, forward!' cried the dragoon hoarsely.

'At a trot!' shouted Mellersh.

'No, no; gallop!' roared the dragoon, and his horse darted ahead.

'Halt!' shouted Mellersh in a ringing voice, for he had not forgotten old field-practice; and the three horses stopped short.

'Listen!' he continued, in a voice of authority.; 'they've half an hour's start nearly, and we shall not overtake them this stage. We must not blow our horses at the beginning. A steady trot for the first few miles, and then forward at a canter. It will be a long race.'

'Right, sir,' cried the dragoon. 'He's right, Mr. Linnell. ake the lead, sir; my head's on fire.'

'Forward!' cried the Colonel; and away they went through the dark night, but with the chalky road making their way clear.

After a mile or two the rapid swinging trot of the chargers grew into a regular military canter, and that, by an imper-

ceptible change, into a rapid gallop that was now kept up, for the excitement of the chase told upon Mellersh, and his ideas of prudence as to husbanding the horses' powers were swept away as if by the keen wind that dashed by their ears.

'I ought to check him,' said Mellersh, as he toned down his excitement for the minute; and then—'No, I cannot, for I must take that scoundrel by the throat.'

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### THE END OF THE RACE.

Colonel Mellersh was the only one who was likely to ride with a cool head: the others were for racing at the top of the horses' speed. And so it was that before long, as Richard Linnell sat well down and gave his horse its head, James Bell, whom the ride was gradually sobering in one sense, but also making far more excited as he realised clearly the position of his sister, shook his reins, pressed his horse's flanks with his heels, and the brave beast began to almost fly. Naturally enough, the Colonel's steed pressed more heavily upon its bit, refusing, after the fashion of a cavalry horse, to be left behind, and forcing itself between the other two, till the riders were knee to knee, and tearing along as if in a desperate charge.

'We're distressing the horses, Dick,' said Mellersh, turning his head to his right; but Bell heard him.

'I'm sorry for the horses, sir; but they are his. Let them be distressed.'

'We must overtake them,' said Linnell between his teeth.

'Right, sir, right,' cried Bell. 'Forward, Colonel. Please don't draw rein.'

Fortunately for them, the night grew a little lighter, and along the treeless Down road they thundered. Every now and then one of the horses snorted as the dust flew, but mile after mile was spurned beneath their heels and they showed no sign of distress, but seemed to rejoice in the long night gallop and the music of their clattering hoofs.

The road was singularly silent and deserted; not so much as a foot-passenger was on the way, not a vehicle was seen.

A gate at last came in view as they were breathing the horses up a hill, after riding for some distance without a word, the very silence telling the intensity of the men's feelings.

Here was a check, for the gate was closed, and no light visible, but Bell rode close up and kicked hard at the panel, till the door in the gatekeeper's hut was opened.

'Now, then, quick!' cried Bell. 'How long is it since a chaise and four passed?'

'Chaise and four?' said the man surlily.

'Yes, chaise and four. Has a chaise and four passed?'

'What, to-night?'

'Yes, to-night. Answer; quick, or——'

He caught the man by the collar, and the evasion he was about to utter did not pass his lips.

'Yes,' he growled; 'one went by.'

'How long ago?' said the Colonel.

'How long?'

'Yes, yes. Quick, man, quick! and here's a crown for the toll. Keep the change.'

This seemed to enliven the surly fellow's faculties, and he took the money and rubbed his head as he began to unfasten the gate.

'Well, how long?' cried the Colonel.

'Long? Well a good bit ago, sir.'

'Yes, yes, but what do you mean by a good bit?'

'Mebbe two hours—mebbe hour and a half. I've been asleep since.'

'Come along,' cried the Colonel, who was as excited now as his companions. 'There's nothing more to be got from this lout.'

They left the man leaning on the gate, having gained nothing whatever by the colloquy but a short breathing space for their horses, and these continued their gallop the moment they were through.

They passed a side road now and then, and at the first Linnell turned in his saddle.

'Is it likely that they will leave the main road?' he said.

'No,' was the prompt answer given by Bell, without waiting for the Colonel to speak. 'They're going west—far enough, I dare say—and they must change their horses now and then. We shall hear of them at Cheldon.'

Bell was right, for, when, at the end of another quarter of an hour, they cantered into the little post town, there was a light still burning in a lantern in the inn yard, and an ostler proved to be a little more communicative.

Yes, a postchaise—a yellow one—came in half an hour ago, and changed horses and went on. Their horses were all in a muck sweat, and here was one of the boys.

A postboy came out of the tap, and stood staring.

He knew nothing, he said, only that he and his mate had brought a party from Saltinville.

'A lady and gentleman?' said Linnell sharply.

'I d'know,' said the postboy. 'I didn't ride the wheeler; I was on one of the leaders.'

'But you must have seen?' cried Linnell angrily.

'No; I didn't see nothing. I'd enough to do to look after my horses. Bad road and precious hilly 'bout here, sir.'

'Come along,' cried Linnell angrily.

'Walk your horses for a few minutes,' said Mellersh quietly; and as Linnell and Bell went on he dismounted and thrust his hand into his pocket. 'Just tighten these girths for me a little, will you, my man?' he said, turning to the postboy, and slipping a guinea into his hand.

'Cert'ny, sir. Get a bit slack they do after a few miles canter. Steady, my lad. Nice horse, sir, that he is,' continued the postboy, who was smooth civility itself. 'Must be a pleasure to ride him.'

'Yes,' said Mellersh, as the man went on talking and buckling with his head supporting the saddle-flap. 'You don't get such a nag as that for a leader, eh?'

'No, sir, not likely. Fifteen pounders is about our cut. That one's worth a hundred. All of a sweat he is, and yet not a bit blown. You've come fast, sir.'

'Yes; at a good rattling gallop nearly all the ten miles.'

''Leven, sir, a good 'leven, and a bad road.'

'Is it, though?' said Mellersh quietly, as he prepared to mount again.'

'All that, sir.'

'Postboys' miles, eh?'

'No, sir; honest miles. We'd charge twelve. Wouldn't you like them stirrups shortened two or three holes?' said the man eagerly.

'No, thanks; no. I'm an old soldier, and we always ride with a long stirrup. Matter of use. Shall we catch them, do you think?'

'What, with them horses, sir? Yes, easy. They've got a shocking bad team. They never have a decent change here. Lookye here, sir. You put on a decent canter, and you'll be up to them before they get to Drumley. The road's awful for wheels for about six miles; but when you get about a mile on from here, you can turn off the road on the off-side, and there's five miles of good, close turf for you where a chaise couldn't go, but there's plenty of room for a

horse. Good-night, sir; thankye, sir. Good luck to you.'

Mellersh said 'good-night' and cantered off after his companions, his steed needing no urging to join its fellows.

'Anyone would think that a guinea dissolved into golden oil and made a man's temper and his tongue run easily. I can't prove it, but I should not be surprised if that was one of Rockley's own guineas. Odd. Running him down with his own horses, and his own coin. Well, he deserves it all.'

'We're on the track right enough, Dick,' he cried, as he overtook Linnell; Bell, in his impatience, being a couple of hundred yards ahead.

'Are you sure? I don't understand this fellow. Why should he be so eager to overtake that scoundrel?'

'Can't say. Puzzled me,' replied Mellersh drily.

'Is he leading us wrong?'

'No. We are well on our way, and shall overtake them by the time they reach the next posting house. Forward.'

Mellersh did not feel quite sure, but his confidence increased as he found the postboy's words correct about the badness of the road, and the smooth turf at the side, on to which they turned, and cantered along easily for mile after mile.

Every now and then Bell burst forth with some fierce expletive, as if he could not contain his rage; and they gathered that at times it was against himself, at others

against Rockley. As fierce a rage, too, burned in Linnell's breast, compounded of bitter hatred, jealousy, and misery.

He could not talk to Mellersh, many of whose remarks fell upon unheeding ears, while Linnell asked himself why he was doing all this to save from misery and shame a woman who did not deserve his sympathy.

But, when he reasoned thus, it seemed as if Claire's pure, sad face looked up into his reproachfully, and the thoughts her gentle loving eyes engendered made him press his horse's flanks, and send him along faster as he said to himself:

'It is a mystery. I cannot understand it; and were she everything that is bad, I should be compelled to fight for her and try to save her to the end.'

Mile after mile was passed, and though the dull thudding of their horses' hoofs upon the soft turf gave them opportunities for hearing the rattle of wheels and the trampling on the rough road, no sound greeted their ears.

'We shall never catch them, gentlemen, like this,' cried Bell at last. 'Curse the horses! Push on. If we kill the poor brutes we must overtake that chaise.'

'Forward then,' said Mellersh eagerly, for there was that in the young man's voice that cleared away the last shadow of doubt and suspicion.

They had been on the grass waste beside the road for quite five miles when, all at once, the way seemed to

narrow; and they were about to turn on to the road, but Linnell drew rein suddenly.

'Stop!' he cried. 'Listen!'

There was no doubt about it. As soon as they drew up, with their mounts breathing hard, and snorting or champing their bits, there came on the night air the *beat, beat* of trotting horses, and the rattle of wheels.

'There,' cried Mellersh, 'that settles it. Forward, again!'

The horses seemed almost to divine that they had only to put on a final spurt and finish their task, for they went off at a free gallop, and before long there was the rattle of the wheels plainly heard, though for the most part it was drowned by the sound of the trampling hoofs, for the pursuers were now upon the hard, chalky road.

A quarter of an hour's hard riding and they were well in view, in spite of the darkness of the night and the cloud of dust churned up by the team in the chaise. It was evident that the postboys were being urged to do their best; and as they had put their wretched horses to a gallop, the pursuers could see the chaise sway from side to side when the wheels jolted in and out of the ruts worn in the neglected road.

Had any doubt remained as to the occupants of the chaise, they would soon have been at an end; for, as Linnell pushed on taking one side, and Mellersh the other, Rockley's voice could be heard shouting from the front of the chaise, and bidding the postboys whip and spur.

It was the work of minutes, then of moments, when Linnell, who was now leading in a break-neck gallop, yelled to the postboys to stop.

'Go on, you scoundrels! Gallop!' roared Rockley from the front window. 'Go on, or I fire.'

The man on the wheeler half turned in his saddle and made as if to pull up, but there was the flash of a pistol, the quick report, and as a bullet whistled over his head, the postboy uttered a cry of fear, and bent down till his face almost touched the horse's mane, while his companion on the leader did the same, and they whipped and spurred their jaded horses frantically.

'Stop!' shouted Linnell again. 'Stop!'

'Go on! Gallop!' roared Rockley, 'or I'll blow out your brains.'

The men crouched lower. Their horses tore on; the chaise leaped and rocked and seemed about to go over, and all was rush and excitement, noise and dust.

Linnell was well abreast of the chaise door now, and pushing on to get to the postboy who rode the leader, when the glass on his side was dashed down, and, pistol-in-hand, Rockley leaned out.

'Back!' he said hoarsely, 'or I fire.'

'You scoundrel!' roared Linnell. 'Cowardly dog! but you are caught.'

'Stop, or I fire,' shouted Rockley again, fuming with

rage and vexation at being overtaken in the hour of his triumph.

'Fire if you dare!' cried Linnell excitedly, as he pressed on.

*Crack!*

There was a second flash and report, and the horse Linnell rode made a spring forward as if it had been hit.

The thought flashed across Linnell's brain that in another few moments the brave beast he bestrode would stagger and fall beneath him, and that then the cowardly scoundrel who had fired would escape with the woman he was ready to give his life to save. A curious mist seemed to float before his eyes, the hot blood of rage to surge into his brain, lights danced before him, and for the moment he felt hardly accountable for his actions.

All he knew was that he was abreast of the wheeler, with the man whipping and spurring with all his might; that the horses were snorting and tearing along in a wild race, and that Rockley was leaning out of the window yelling to the men to gallop or he would fire again.

Linnell had a misty notion Mellersh was somewhere on the other side, and that Bell was galloping behind, but he did not call to them for help. He did not even see that Mellersh was pushing forward and had reached out to catch the off-leader's rein. All he did realize was that Claire Denville, the woman he loved, was in peril; that her whole

future depended upon him; and that he must save her at any cost.

He was galloping now a little in advance of the postboy. Their knees had touched for an instant; then his leg was in front, and he was leaning forward.

'Touch that rein, and I fire,' roared Rockley.

Then there was once more a flash cutting the darkness; and as the bullet from Rockley's pistol sped on its errand, the horse made one plunge forward, and then pitched upon its head. There was a tremendous crash of breaking glass and woodwork, and beside the road the wreck of a chaise with two horses down, and the leaders tangled in their harness and kicking furiously till they had broken free.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### RICHARD LINNELL THINKS HE HAS BEEN A FOOL.

For a few moments, in the suddenness of the catastrophe, every one was too much astounded to take any steps. Linnell was the first to recover himself, and, leaping from his horse, he threw the rein to Bell.

Mellersh followed his example, joining Linnell as he tried to drag open the door of the chaise, which was over upon its side with the off-wheeler kicking in the front, as it lay there upon its companion in a tangle of harness.

The framework was so wrenched that for a minute or two the door would not yield, and the utter silence within sent a chill of horror through Linnell.

'Let me come, Dick,' whispered Mellersh, the catastrophe that had so suddenly befallen them forcing him to speak in subdued tones; 'let me come, Dick. I'm stronger, perhaps.'

'Pish!' was the angry reply, as Linnell strained at the door, which suddenly yielded and flew open, the glass falling out with a tinkling noise.

Just at the same time the man with the leaders trotted back with his frightened horses, the broken traces dragging behind.

'Hurt, Jack?' he cried to his fellow.

'No, not much,' was the answer, as the postboy who rode the wheeler dragged his leg from beneath his horse, and immediately stepped round and held down the head of the animal, which was kicking and struggling to rise. 'Woa! will yer. Hold still, Captain!'

With the customary feeling of helplessness that comes over a horse as soon as its head is pressed down, the poor animal ceased its frantic efforts, uttered a piteous sigh that was like that of a human being, and lay perfectly still.

'Old Spavin's a dead 'un, mate,' said the man.

'Dead?' said the second postboy.

'Dead as a nit, mate. There'll be something to pay for to-night's job.'

'Anyone killed?' said the second man in a whisper.

'I d'know, and I don't care,' grumbled the man; 'my leg's bruzz horrid. Shutin' like that! It's as bad as highwaymen. Here, come and help cut some of this harness. They'll stand now. Take out your knife, mate, and use it. They'll have to pay. I can't sit on this 'oss's head all night.'

'There's some of 'em got it,' whispered the second man in a low voice, as he dismounted and stood beside his comrade

watching while Linnell lifted out the insensible figure of one of the occupants of the chaise, and bore her, tangled in a thick cloak, to the roadside, where he laid her reverently upon the turf.

'With you directly, Dick,' said Mellersh, still in the subdued voice, as he climbed into the chaise, and, exerting all his strength, raised Rockley and half thrust, half lifted him out, to drag him to the other side of the road.

'Is she much hurt, sir?' said Bell hoarsely. 'I can't leave the horses.'

'I can't say. I don't know yet,' panted Linnell, who was trying to lay open the folds of the cloak, which he at last succeeded in doing, so that the air blew freely on the insensible woman's face.

Linnell's pulse beat madly, as he half closed his eyes, and kept his head averted while he knelt there in the semi-darkness, and placed his hand upon the woman's breast.

Then he snatched his hand away and felt giddy. But a throb of joy ran through him. Her heart was beating, and he felt sure she was only fainting from the fright.

'Why don't you speak, sir?' cried Bell angrily. 'Is she much hurt?'

'I think not, my man, only fainting,' said Linnell.

'Well?'

This to Mellersh, who came to him from where he had laid Rockley.

'I don't know,' was the answer to the abrupt query. 'Only stunned, I think. Head cut with the broken glass.'

'Not killed then?' said Linnell bitterly.

'No. Such as he generally come off easily,' replied Mellersh. 'What's to be done?'

'Better send our man back for a fresh post-chaise,' said Linnell quickly. 'Will you attend to Miss Denville?' he whispered. 'I think I'll take one of the horses and ride back myself for the chaise.'

'Why not let me go, Dick?'

'No,' said Linnell in sombre tones. 'I've stopped this wretched flight. My part's done. Mellersh, I trust to you to place her once more under her father's charge.'

'Will not you do it?'

'I? No. I have done. We'll send this man for the chaise, though. That scoundrel Rockley may come to again and be troublesome.'

'Lookye here, gents,' said the man who had ridden the wheeler, 'we want to know who's going to pay for this night's job. My leg's bad; my 'oss is dead; and the chay's all to pieces.'

'Wait and see, my man,' said Mellersh sternly. 'You will be recompensed.'

'But fine words butter no parsnips, you know, sir. I want to know——'

'Hold your tongue, fellow! I am Colonel Mellersh, of Saltinville. That man you were driving is Major Rockley, of the —th Dragoons. Of course everything will be paid for, and you will be recompensed. Now then, which of you can ride back for a fresh chaise?'

'Well, sir, I——'

'D——n it, man, don't talk. Five guineas if a chaise is here within an hour.'

'Ah, that's business, sir. Come on, mate. We'll be back before then.'

The man seemed to forget his bruised leg, and with the help of his comrade the girths were unbuckled, and the saddle dragged off the dead horse, placed upon the other, and they were about to start when the first postboy asked whether it would be safe to leave the injured chaise where it was.

As it happened, in the struggle it had been dragged off the road on to the grass border, and lay there, so that there was ample room for passers-by; and, satisfied with this, the postboys were off at a rapid trot.

'Rather an awkward position if that fellow is seriously injured,' said Linnell grimly.

'Pooh! man; it was an accident, and he was engaged in an unlawful act,' said Mellersh coolly, but with a peculiar meaning in his tone.

Linnell winced, for the mental pang was sharp. His old

friend suggested that Claire might have been a willing partner in that night's adventure.

He made no reply. He dared not, for fear that it should be an angry retort; and content that he had certainly for the present frustrated Rockley's machinations, he walked to his side, and, seeing that his temple was bleeding, he knelt down by him, took out his handkerchief, and bound up the cut, furtively watching Mellersh the while as he stood by the other prostrate figure on the turf.

Linnell longed to go to her and kneel there, holding her little hand in his, but he was too heartsore; and, telling himself that there was more dignity in keeping aloof and playing the manly part of ceasing to care for one whom he believed to be unworthy of his love, even if he rendered help when there was need, he contented himself with deputing the care he would gladly have bestowed to another.

It had grown darker during the past few minutes, a thicker cloud having veiled the sky, when, as Linnell rose from where he knelt, he heard a sigh which went through him.

'She is coming round,' he muttered. 'Poor girl! Poor, weak, foolish girl! I——'

'Why, Dick!' cried Mellersh in a sharp, angry voice 'Come here!'

'What is it? There is no danger, is there?' cried Linnell, hastening across the road.

'Danger? No,' cried Mellersh angrily. 'Whom do you suppose we have stopped here?'

'Whom? Miss Denville, of course, and—Good Heavens! —Miss Dean!'

'What is it? Where am I? You—Mr. Linnell!—Colonel Mellersh!' said Cora confusedly, as she struggled up into a sitting position.

'At your service, madam,' said Mellersh, with a peculiar bitterness in his voice.

'What has happened?' cried Cora, holding her hand to her head, and staring wildly round till her eyes lighted upon the broken chaise. 'Oh!'

She said no more, but struggled to her feet, turned giddy, and would have fallen, had not Mellersh caught her arm and supported her.

It was evident that she had realised her position in that one glance, and she seemed to shudder slightly. At the end of a few minutes, though, she recovered, and, shrinking from Mellersh, she looked round.

'Give me that cloak,' she said calmly. 'It is cold.'

Linnell, who was half-stunned by the discovery, hurriedly stooped and picked up the cloak, spreading it rather clumsily and placing it upon her shoulders.

'Thank you,' she said coldly; and there was an awkward pause, during which Mellersh walked to and fro with the look of a caged wild beast.

'Well?' said Cora suddenly. 'Why are we waiting, Colonel Mellersh? Will you kindly see me home?'

'See you home?' he replied.

'Where is that man—Major Rockley?' cried Cora hastily.

'I am afraid he is incapacitated for further service, Miss Dean,' said Mellersh coldly. 'The accident has prevented him from carrying out—shall I say your wishes?'

'What?' she replied. 'Do you think I——! Pah!'

She turned her back upon him angrily.

'Mr. Linnell,' she said, 'you will not insult me if I ask you to see me safely home, even if I do not enter into any explanations. Let us go at once.'

There was a strange resentful hauteur in her tone, and Linnell offered her his arm.

'We will walk a little way if you wish it, Miss Dean,' he said; 'but we ought hardly to leave Major Rockley in this state. My friend Colonel Mellersh——'

'Don't mind me, Dick,' said the latter. 'I'll play hospital nurse, if Miss Dean will trust me with the care of the Major.'

Cora did not condescend to reply, but stepped forward as if to walk back.

'We are many miles from Saltinville, Miss Dean,' said Linnell, 'and a post-chaise will be here soon.'

Further conversation was prevented by James Bell whispering hurriedly:

'It's all a mistake, Mr. Linnell, and the consequences will

be terrible if I am found to have taken the Major's horses. Can you do without me?'

'Yes,' said Linnell quickly; 'but your master?'

'I can't think of him, sir,' said Bell hastily. 'I must think of myself. Gentlemen, I thought we were chasing another lady whom I would have given my life to save. I stood by you; will you stand by me?'

'Yes,' said Mellersh quickly. 'Take the horses back. I'll stay by your master till help comes.'

'And you will not tell upon me about the horses, gentlemen?'

'No,' said Mellersh shortly. 'Go.'

'And you, Mr. Linnell?'

'You may trust me,' was the reply.

Bell went off with the horses on the instant, and a tedious time of waiting ensued, the end of which was that it was arranged when the fresh post-chaise came that Mellersh should ride with Cora and the injured man back to the posting house, Linnell walking by the side of the chaise.

On reaching the inn, Rockley was placed in the landlord's care, with instructions to fetch a medical man, and the three afterwards had a perfectly silent ride back to Saltinville, where Mrs. Dean was found sitting up in a high state of excitement, and ready to greet her daughter:

'Lor! Bet—Cora—you have give me a turn. I thought it was a real elopement, and now you've come back.'

'Well, Dick,' said Mellersh grimly, as they stood together in the latter's room. 'What do you think of it now?'

'I think I've been a fool,' said Linnell shortly; 'but I can't quite make it out.'

'Neither can I,' responded Mellersh, after a pause.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### UNDER A THICK CLOAK.

'You'll be so glad to hear, my dear,' prattled on Mrs. Barclay, who was exceedingly warm and happy. 'There's quite a reconciliation, my dear.'

'Reconciliation?'

'Yes, dear. Young Cornet Denville has just fetched her to take her round the grounds, which is just as it should be, you know. I'd have gone with them, but I'm afraid of the night air, and catching a bad cold, you see, and so I think it's better not to risk taking a chill, and——'

'Who fetched her—Cornet Denville?'

'Yes, my dear, her brother; and I've been thinking——'

'Don't talk, Mrs. Barclay,' cried Cora quickly—'don't talk, pray, only tell me which way she went.'

'Through that door, my dear, and on to the lawn. You'll catch 'em if you make haste. Bless us and save us, what is the matter with her? Any one would think poor Claire had run off with her young man. Dear, dear! what a bless-

ing to be sure,' sighed Mrs. Barclay complacently, as she fanned herself, 'to have one's own Jo-si-ah, and no troubles of that kind now.'

Cora was gone—out through the window and on to the grass. There were couples here and there in the dim light, but not those she wished to see, as she stood passing her large lace scarf over her head.

'What shall I do?' she moaned; and in frantic haste she ran down the first path she came to, feeling more and more sure that she was wrong; but directly after she found that this crossed a broad grass path at right angles; and as she reached it she uttered a gasp, for there was a couple coming down towards her, and she felt rather than saw that it was those she sought.

They were close upon her, coming between the bushes, and Morton was talking loudly, with the thick utterance of one nearly inebriated, while Claire was answering in a troubled way.

'Very sorry,' he said slowly, 'sorry, little sis. Love you too much not to 'pologise, but—man's position—as officer and a gentleman——'

'Yes, yes, dear, you've said so before.'

'And I must say you—— Hallo! Who's thish?'

'Claire!' cried Cora, in a low whisper. 'Back to the house—quick!'

'Miss Dean!'

'Yes. Quick! For heaven's sake. Go. Your father.'

Cora did not know it, but she had touched the right chord.

Claire had seemed startled at first, and had hesitated as they stood together in the darkness with Morton holding the new-comer's arm; but as Cora exclaimed, as the place of safety Claire was to seek, 'your father!' the thought flashed through Claire's brain that he had had some terrible seizure —or, worse, that horror of which he was in dread had come upon him, and in an instant, she had turned and run back towards the house.

'Why, what the dickensh—I say, what's matter?' stammered Morton. 'Here, Miss Dean, I know you—you know —bu'ful Miss Dean. Proud of your company. Officer and a gentleman—and take my——'

It was so cleverly done that Cora was taken by surprise. She was about, as the simplest way out of the difficulty, to take the lad's arm, and walk back with him to the house, when there was a slight rustle behind her, the sound of a blow or fall, and the latter muffled and strange, for a great cavalry cloak was thrown over her head, twisted tightly round her, binding her arms to her side, and stifling the cry she uttered; and as she struggled fiercely for her liberty she was lifted from her feet and borne away.

It was all done so quickly that she was staggered, and she had not recovered from her confusion when she felt herself forced into a carriage—the chaise, evidently, of which

she had heard. Then came the banging of a door as she was held back by two strong arms, the swaying and jerking of the chaise as it went over rough ground and ruts. Then she realized that it swayed more than ever as they turned on to a hard road, and she could hear the dull, smothered rattle of the wheels and the tramp of horses' feet.

She was a woman of plenty of strength of mind; but, for the time being, the fact of having fallen into this trap laid for Claire stunned her, and she felt a depressing dread. But by degrees this gave place to her returning courage, and she struggled furiously, but found that she was tightly held, and a deep voice she knew kept on bidding her to be patient—not to be alarmed—and the like.

In the midst of her excitement she ceased struggling and lay back in the corner of the chaise thinking, for the adventure had now assumed a ludicrous aspect. It was dramatic—a scene that might have happened in a play, and she laughed as she thought of Major Rockley's rage and disappointment when he realized his mistake.

'I'm not afraid of him,' she thought, 'and I hate him with all my heart. It is only waiting till we stop, and then the tables will be turned.'

'Ah, that's more sensible,' came through the thick cloak. 'Promise to be patient and not call out, and I will take off the cloak.'

It was very hot. She could hardly breathe, but she

dreaded having it removed till she recalled how dark it was; that it must be even darker, shut up in the chaise, and that she had on her large lace mantilla, with which she could well cover her face.

'Shall I take off the cloak?' was said, after they had stopped and changed horses; and, feeling that she must have air, she made a gesture with her hands, passing them up towards her face as she felt the great cloth-covering partly removed, and, as it was drawn away, carefully covering her face and neck with the scarf.

'At last!' exclaimed her companion, trying to pass his arm round her, but she struck at him so fiercely that he desisted, and just then the chaise slackened speed.

'What is it?' he cried, gripping his prisoner's arm with one hand, as he leaned forward and let down a front window.

'Like us to go on as fast as this, Captain? Road's getting a bit hilly.'

'Yes, and faster, you fools. On, quick! What's that?'

'Sounds like horses, sir, coming on behind.'

'Oh, not after us, but go on as fast as you can.'

The chaise rumbled on as the window was drawn up, and the sound of the horses deadened; but Rockley let down the window on his side of the vehicle and thrust out his head.

As he did so Cora listened intently, and made out the beating of horses' hoofs behind, now dying out, now louder, now dying out again, but always heard; and her heart gave

a joyful bound as the thought came that an alarm might have been given by Morton Denville, and these be friends in pursuit—Richard Linnell perhaps.

Her heart sank like lead. No; she was not afraid of Major Rockley, and she did not care a fig for the opinion of Saltinville society. She had been carried off against her will, and the sneers would be those against Rockley, not against her.

The chaise might go on for hours—all night, if the Major liked. The longer it was before he discovered his mistake the greater his rage would be. What was there to fear? If she shrieked the post-boys must come to her help, or she could command help at the next stopping-place.

And the horsemen coming on?

Yes, they were evidently gaining ground, but it was not to overtake her. He was trying to save the woman he loved —he, Richard Linnell—and her heart sank lower and lower still.

Then it gave a bound, for there was the click-click of a pistol, just as before now she had heard it on the stage, and Rockley said:

'That's right. I'm glad you are quiet. I've got you, and, by Jove, I'll shoot the man who tries to get you away as I would a dog.'

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### A LITTLE GOSSIP.

That hat which the Master of the Ceremonies raised so frequently to the various visitors looked in its solidity as if it might very well become an heirloom, and descend to his son, should he in more mature life take to his father's duties.

Stuart Denville had just replaced it for about the twentieth time that morning, when he encountered Lady Drelincourt in her chair.

Her ladyship had been very cold since her visit to the Denvilles, but this particular morning she was all smiles and good humour.

'Now, here you are, Denville, and you'll tell me all about it. You were there?'

'Yes, dear Lady Drelincourt,' said Denville, with his best smile, as he thought of Morton and his possible future. 'I was there. At—er——'

'Pontardent's, yes. Now, tell me, there's a good man, all about it. Is the Major much hurt? Now, how tire-

some! What do you want, Bray? You are always hunting me about with that wicked boy.'

'No, no,' said Sir Matthew, in his ponderous fashion. 'Drawn, Lady Drelincourt, drawn. Attracted, eh, Payne?'

Sir Harry Payne—'that wicked boy,' as he was termed by her ladyship—declared upon his reputation that Sir Matthew Bray was quite right. It was attraction.

'I felt it myself, demme, that I did, horribly, madam; but I said I would be true to my friend Bray, here, and I fled from temptation like a man.'

'I'm afraid I can't believe you—either of you,' said her ladyship, simpering. 'But, now, do tell me—no, no, don't go, Denville; I want to talk to you. Sir Harry, now was Major Rockley, that dreadful Mephistopheles, half killed?'

Sir Harry Payne screwed up his face, shook his head, took snuff loudly, and, raising his hat, walked away.

'How tantalising!' cried Lady Drelincourt. 'Now, Bray, do tell me. Is it true that he was carrying off that Miss Dean, and her mother sent Colonel Mellersh and Mr. Linnell to fetch them back?'

'Mustn't tell. Can't say a word, dear Lady Drelincourt. Brother officer, you see. But——'

Sir Matthew Bray blew out his cheeks, frowned, rolled his eyes, pursed up his lips, and looked as if he were fully charged with important information which honour forbade

him to part with, ending by shaking his head at her ladyship, and then giving it a solemn nod.

'I knew I was right,' said her ladyship triumphantly. 'Now, didn't you hear the same version, Denville?'

'Well, I—must confess, your ladyship—that I—er—did.'

'Of course. That's it. Well, Rockley's a very, very wicked man, and I don't think I shall ever speak to him again. I've quite done with him. Yes, you may stay a little while, Bray, but not long. People are so scandalous. Good-bye, Denville. Is your little girl quite well?'

Denville declared that she was in the best of health; and, as Lady Drelincourt was wheeled away in one direction, so much fashionable lumber, the Master of the Ceremonies went mincing in the other.

Saltinville boasted of about a dozen versions of the scandal, one of the most popular being that which was picked up at Miss Clode's. In this version Cora Dean had no part, but Claire Denville had.

For a whole week these various accounts were bandied about and garbled and told, till the result of the mixture was very singular, and it would have puzzled an expert to work out the simple truth. Then something fresh sprang up, and the elopement or abduction—nobody at last knew which, or who were the principals—was forgotten, especially as Rockley was seen about as usual, and the proprietor of the chaise and the killed horse was fully recompensed by the Major.

How he obtained the money, he and Josiah Barclay best knew.

But Stuart Denville was disappointed with respect to his daughter's prospects. It was sheer pleasure to her to be able to stay quietly at home; but her father bitterly regretted the absence of invitation cards, while he, for one, remained strangely in ignorance that it was his own child who was nearly carried off that night.

## CHAPTER XXX.

### A TERRIBLE RESURRECTION.

A GENTLEMAN to see you, ma'am.'

'To see me, Isaac?' said Claire, starting in terror, and with a strange foreboding of ill. 'Who is it? Did he give his name?'

'No, miss; he would not give any name. Said it was on important business. He asked for Miss May first.'

'For Miss May?'

'Yes, ma'am; and I told him she was married, and did not live here now; and he smiled, and said "Of course." Then he said he would see you.'

Claire had risen, and she stood listening to the man, clutching the chair tightly, and striving hard to seem composed.

'Where is he, Isaac?' she asked, hardly knowing what fell from her lips.

'In the dining-room, ma'am.'

'I will come down.'

Isaac left the room, and Claire drew a long breath.

Who could it be? Some one who had forgotten that May was married, and then recalled it! What did it mean?

She stood with her hands tightly clasped, gazing straight before her, and then walked quickly to the door, and down into the dining-room, so quietly that the short, slight man gazing out of the window did not hear her entrance.

Claire was puzzled while for the moment she gazed at the attitude of her visitor, whose long black hair fell over the collar of his tightly-buttoned surtout, as he stood with one hand resting upon his hip, the other holding his hat and tasselled cane.

She drew a breath of relief. It was no one she knew, of that she felt sure. Perhaps it was no fresh trouble after all.

As if divining the presence of some one in the room, the visitor just then turned quickly, displaying handsome aquiline features, with the olive skin and dark eyes of a young man of about thirty, who threw down his hat and cane and advanced smiling.

'My dear Miss Denville—my dear Claire!' he exclaimed, speaking with a foreign accent.

Claire stood as if frozen, gazing at him in horror.

'M. Gravani!' she cried at last in a hoarse whisper.

'Say Louis,' he said eagerly, taking her hands and kissing them. 'Why not? Surely my dear May told you—that she is my wife. No, no, do not be angry with me. It was

wrong, I know. But you—you were always so sweet and good and kind, dear Claire!'

He kissed her hands again, and she stood as if in a dream while he went on—speaking fervidly.

'You, so tender, and who loved dear May so much. You will forgive me. We were so young—I was so poor—I dared not speak. What would the Signore Denville have said? That I was mad. May must have told you—she did tell you we were married?'

'Yes—yes,' said Claire slowly, 'she told me.'

'That is well. And the old man—the good father, she told him, too!'

'No,' said Claire, still in the same slow, dreamy way, as she strove to listen to her visitor, and at the same time work out in her own mind the meaning of the horrible situation in which her sister was placed.

'She did not tell him? She promised me she would. But the servant told me he knew that May was married.'

'Yes,' stammered Claire; 'he knew.'

'I ought to have spoken, but I dared not. I was younger then and so poor. I was obliged to go back to my Italia to try if I could not win fame there and fortune for my little flower of beauty—my May-bud. Claire—dear sister—no, no, you frown—you must forgive us, for we were so young, and we loved so much. Ah, you are not well. I frighten you. I came here so sudden. But my news is so good. I have

succeeded so in my art, and I have possessions too. My poor father is dead. I am not a rich man—what you English call rich; but I have enough, and you will forgive me. But, May? She is not here?'

'No, no,' said Claire, with her lips turning ashy pale.

'She is not far away?'

'Not far away,' said Claire, 'but Louis, Monsieur Gravani——'

'No, no, not Monsieur—not Signore. I am Louis, your fratello, your brother. Now tell me. My heart beats to be with her once again. She is not changed, I know. The same little angel face that Raffaello painted, and that I have had ever in my heart.'

'No, she is not changed,' sighed Claire.

'No, she could not change. La mia fiorella!'

'But Louis——'

'Yes? What? Why do you look at me so? She is ill!'

He raised his voice to a wild cry, and his handsome face grew convulsed as he seized Claire's hands.

'No, no,' she cried. 'No, no; she is quite well.'

'Then take me to her now. I can wait no longer. I must see her now.'

'No, no, you cannot. It is impossible,' cried Claire.

'Then there is something that you do not tell me. Speak; you are killing me.'

'She—she—my poor sister—she thought—she heard—she had news, Louis—that you were dead.'

'Dead?—I?—dead? Oh, my poor little flower!' he cried, with a ring of tender pity in his voice, but changing to a fierce burst of anger on the instant. 'But who told her? Who sent her those lies?'

'I don't know—I never knew. But she grieved for you, Louis—because you were dead.'

'My little tender flower! Oh! oh! it is too cruel. But I am here—here, waiting to press her to my heart once more. You shall take me to her now.'

'It would be impossible. I could not. It would kill her. No, you must wait till to-morrow.'

'No, no; I could not wait,' he cried excitedly. 'I love her. I am here. I must see her now.'

Claire felt beside herself, and her hands dropped helplessly to her side, as if she despaired of averting the catastrophe that was to come. What was she to do?—say something to deceive this man and keep him waiting until she had seen and prepared her sister?

The task was hateful to her in the extreme; and it seemed as if her life was to be made up of subterfuges and concealments, all of which caused reflections upon her.

'You love May still?' she said at last.

'Love her still!' he cried, with all the impassioned manner of a young Italian. 'I tell you it has been desolation to be

separated from her all this time; but it was our hard fate, and I have suffered, as she has, poor child. But the thought of seeing her again has comforted me, and I have waited, oh, so patiently, till I could come to her again. Now, tell me, good sister, I must see her—quick—at once.'

'No,' cried Claire, 'it is impossible. You must wait.'

'Wait?—I?—wait?'

'Yes,' said Claire desperately; and there was so much firmness and decision in her tone that the weak, impassioned young Italian was mastered, and yielded to her will.

'Not long, sweet sister, not for long?'

'No, not for long,' said Claire excitedly. 'It is for May's sake. You would not wish to harm her?'

'I? Harm her? Heaven! no. I would die for her,' cried the young man enthusiastically. 'You little think how we love.'

'Then wait till I have seen, and broken the news to her.'

'Broken the news, when my arms are throbbing to embrace her once more?'

'Go to where you are staying, and wait patiently till you hear from me or from May, arranging for an interview.'

'Go?—and wait?'

'Yes,' cried Claire; 'for May's sake.'

'I? Go and wait!' sighed the young man. 'Well, it is for her. But the old father? Let me stay and embrace

him, and tell him how rich I am, and of my joy. He was always kind to me, even when I was so poor.'

'Impossible!' cried Claire, trembling for fear that her father should return.

'Impossible? Well, I will go. Addio—addio. I shall be at the hotel. You will hasten to her, sweet sister, and tell her my heart has been always filled with her sweet image; that her dear face is in a dozen pictures that I have painted in Rome. You will tell her this?'

'Yes, yes,' cried Claire desperately. 'I will go and tell her you are here.'

'Addio, cara mia!' he said, as he bent over and tenderly kissed her hands, and then her cheek. 'Addio, sweet sister, I am dying till I once more hold her in these arms.'

Claire led him to the door, as if she were in a dream; and, as she listened to his departing steps, her hands involuntarily clasped her throbbing head, and Isaac confided to his fellow-servants the information that there were strange goings-on in that house, and that when he liked to speak—well, they would see.

'What shall I do?'

## CHAPTER XXXI.

### CLAIRE TAKES STEPS: SO DOES MAY.

'WHAT shall I do?'

The low wild cry of agony that escaped from Claire Denville's breast was heard by none, as she stood motionless, listening to Louis Gravani's steps till they died away.

Then, trembling violently in an agony of terror and despair, she rushed up to her bedroom, and threw herself upon her knees, with her hands still clasping her temples.

What should she do? To whom could she go for help and counsel? Mrs. Barclay? Impossible! Cora Dean! No, no: she could not tell her! Her father? She shivered at the thought. It would nearly kill him. He believed so in poor, weak, childish May. She could not—she dared not tell him.

If she had only gone to him at once and shared her secret with him when May had confessed her marriage, and told her about the little child, how easy all this would have been now!

No! Would it? The complication was too dreadful.

Claire knelt there with her brain swimming, and the confusion in her mind growing moment by moment worse.

She wanted to think clearly—to plan out some way of averting a horrible exposure from their family; and, as she strove, the thought came upon her with crushing force that she was sinking into a miserable schemer—one who was growing lower in the sight of all she knew.

She pressed her hands over her eyes, but she could not shut out Richard Linnell's face, and his stern, grave looks, that seemed to read her through and through, keeping her back from acting some fresh deceit, when something was spurring her on to try and save poor weak May.

The horror of Lady Teigne's death: the suspicion of her having made an assignation with Sir Harry Payne; the supposed elopement with Major Rockley—all these clinging to her and lowering her in the sight of the world. There were those, too, who had noted her visits to the fisherman's cottage.

It was terrible—one hideous confusion, to which this fresh trouble had come; and she asked herself, in the agony of her spirit, whether it would not be better to wait till the dark, soft night had fallen, and the tide was flowing, lapping, and whispering amongst the piles at the end of the pier. She had but to walk quietly down unseen—to descend those steps, and let the cool, soft wave take her to its breast

and bear her away, lulling her to the easy, sweet rest of oblivion.

And May?

She started to her feet at the thought.

And Richard Linnell?

He would go on believing ill of her, and she would never stand up before him, listening as he asked her forgiveness for every doubt, never to be her husband, but ready then to look up to her as all that was pure and true.

May! She must save May. How, she knew not, but she must go to her. Something must be done.

Hurriedly dressing, she went out, and walked swiftly to her brother-in-law's house, where the servant admitted her with no great show of respect, and she was shown into the drawing-room.

'I'll tell my mistress you are here,' said the footman; and he went out, closing the door behind him rather loudly.

The effect was to make a little man jump up from the couch where he had been sleeping, with a loud exclamation.

'What is it? Who the ——. Oh, it's you, is it? Well, what do you want?'

'I came—I called to see May, Frank dear,' said Claire, trembling.

'Well, then, I just wish you wouldn't,' he said testily. 'It's bad enough to have to bear the relationship, without having you come here.'

'Frank!—dear Frank!'

'There, don't "dear Frank" me. I should have thought, after what had occurred, you would have been ashamed to show your face here again.'

'Frank dear, we are brother and sister; for pity's sake, spare me. Is it the duty of a gentleman to speak to me like this?'

She looked at him with a pitying dread in her eyes, as she thought of the horror hanging over his house. His allusions were keen enough, but they were blunt arrows compared to the bolts that threatened to fall upon his home; and, in her desire to shield him and his wife, if possible, from some of the suffering that must come, she scarcely felt their points.

'Gentleman, eh? You behave like a lady, don't you? Nice position we hold in society through you and the old man, don't we? I'll be off abroad, that's what I'll do, and take May away from the old connection.'

'Yes, do!' cried Claire excitedly. 'Do, Frank, at once. No, no; you must not do that.—Heaven help me! What am I saying?' she sighed to herself.

'Best thing to do,' said Burnett. 'Shouldn't have you always coming in then.'

'Frank dear,' said Claire deprecatingly, 'I have not been to see May since——'

'You disgraced yourself on the night of the party,' he said brutally.

'Frank!'

'Oh, come: it's of no use to ride the high horse with me, my lady. I'm not a fool. I repeat it: you haven't been since the night you disgraced us by inviting that little blackguard, Harry Payne, to see you; and it would have been better if you had not come now.'

Claire winced as if she were being lashed, but she uttered no word of complaint. It was her fate, she told herself, to suffer for others, and she was ready to play the social martyr's part, and save May and Burnett if she could.

As she debated in her mind whether Burnett had not proposed the solution of the difficulty in taking her sister away, the thought was crushed by the recollection that May was Gravani's wife, and that she would be saved and made happier could she leave with him.

Then the feeling came that all this was madness, and the position hopeless, and she said imploringly:

'Let me see May, Frank.'

'What do you want with her? To beg for more money? You've kept her short enough lately.'

'Frank! indeed——'

'No lies, please,' he cried. 'I know you've had at least a guinea a week from her for long enough past.'

It was true, but the money was for Gravani's child; and

Claire's face grew hollow and old-looking as she felt that she dared not defend herself.

'I suppose you have come for more money, haven't you?' said Burnett spitefully.

'No—indeed no!' cried Claire.

'I do not believe you,' he said brutally; 'and——'

'Ah, Claire, you here!' said May, rustling into the room, all silk, and scent, and flowers.

'Yes, she's here,' said Burnett; 'and the sooner she's gone the better. I'm going out.'

'Very well, dear,' said May. 'But don't pout and frown like that at his little frightened wife.'

'Get out!' said Burnett, 'and don't be a fool before people.'

He shook her off as he said this, and strutted towards the door, where he turned with a sneering grin upon his face.

'I say,' he cried, 'I didn't give you any money when you asked me this morning.'

'No, dear, you didn't. Give me some now, before you go. Don't go out and leave me without.'

'Not a shilling!' he cried, with an unpleasant cackling laugh.

May stood with the pretty smile upon her face, a strange contrast to the pained classic sorrow upon her sister's better-formed features, amid perfect silence, till the front door closed, and Frank Burnett's strutting step was heard on the shingle walk leading to the gate, when a change came over

the bright, flower-like countenance, which was convulsed with anger in miniature.

'Ugh! Little contemptible wretch!' she exclaimed. 'How I do hate you! Claire, I shall end by running away from the little miserable ape, if I don't make up my mind to kill him. Ah!'

She ended with an ejaculation full of pain, and turned a wondering, childish look of reproach on her sister, for Claire had crossed to her, and suddenly grasped her wrist.

'Silence, May!' she cried.

'Oh, don't!' said May, wresting herself free, and stamping her foot like a fretful, angry child. 'And if you've come here to do nothing but scold me and find fault, you'd better go.'

'May—May! Listen to me.'

'No, I won't. I'll go up to my own room and cry my eyes out. You don't know; you can't imagine what a little wretch he is. I wish you were married to him instead of me.'

'May!'

'I won't listen,' cried the foolish little woman, stopping her ears. 'You bully me for caring for Sir Harry Payne, who is all that is tender and loving; and I'm tied to that hateful little wretch for life, and he makes my very existence a curse.'

'May, will you listen?'

'I can see you are scolding me, but I can't hear a word

you say, and I won't listen. Oh, I do wish you were married to him instead of me.'

'I wish to heaven I were!' cried Claire solemnly.

'What?' cried May, the stopping of whose ears seemed now to be very ineffective. 'You wish you were married to the little mean-spirited, insignificant wretch?'

'Yes,' said Claire excitedly, 'for then you would be free.'

'What do you mean by that, Claire?'

'Did you not tell me that Louis Gravani was dead?'

'Yes, of course I did.'

'Why did you tell me that?'

'Because he went to Rome or Florence—I am not sure which—and caught a fever and died.'

'Are you sure?'

'Well, dear, he never wrote and told me he was dead, of course,' said May with a little laugh, 'but he told me he had caught the fever, and he never wrote to me any more, so, of course, he died.'

'And, without knowing for certain, you married Frank Burnett?'

'Don't talk in that way, dear. It's just like the actress at Drury Lane, where Frank took me. You would make a fortune on the stage. What do you mean, looking at me so tragically?'

'May, prepare yourself for terrible news.'

'Oh, Claire! Is poor, dear papa dead?'

'May, Louis Gravani is alive.'

'Alive? Oh, I am so glad!' she cried, clapping her hands. 'Poor, dear little Louis! How he did love me! Then he isn't dead, after all, and I'm his wife, and not Frank's. Oh, what fun!'

Claire caught at the back of a chair, and stood gazing wildly at her sister, utterly stunned by her childish unthinking manner.

'May—May!' she cried bitterly; 'your sin is finding you out.'

'Sin? How absurd you are! Why, what sin have I committed?'

'That clandestine marriage, May.'

'Now what nonsense, dear. It wasn't my fault, as I told you before. You don't know what love is. I do, and I loved poor, dear little Louis. I couldn't help it, and he made me marry him.'

'Oh, May, May!'

'I tell you, I was obliged to marry him. One can't do as one likes, when one loves. You'll know that some day. But, I am glad.'

'May!' cried Claire reproachfully.

'So I am. Why, he'll come and fetch me away from my miserable tyrant, and we can have little pet blossom away from Fisherman Dick's, and take a cottage somewhere, and then I can sing and play to baby, while dear old Louis

reads the Italian poets to me, and goes on with his painting.'

A piteous sigh escaped from Claire Denville's lips as she fervently breathed in wild appeal:

'My God, help me!' And then—'It is too hard—too hard. What shall I do?'

A change came over the scene. The picture May Burnett had painted dissolved in the thin air, and she turned quickly upon her sister.

'How do you know this, Claire? Has Louis written to you?'

'No. He is here.'

'Here! In Saltinville?

'Yes, here in Saltinville. He would have been at this house, only I prevailed upon him to stay till I had seen you—to prepare you.'

'Oh, Claire! Does he know I am married?'

'No; he believes you have been as faithful to him as he to you.'

'Oh!'

It was a wild cry; and a look of frightened horror came over the pretty baby face, as its owner caught Claire round the waist, and clung to her.

'Claire, Claire!' she cried. 'Save me! What shall I do? Louis is an Italian, and he is all love and passion and jealousy. I dare not see him. He would kill me, if he

knew. What shall I do? What can I do? Oh, this is terrible, Claire!' she cried. 'Claire!' and she shook her sister passionately. 'Why don't you speak? What shall I do?'

Claire remained silent.

'Why don't you speak, I say?' cried May with childish petulance.

'I am praying for help and guidance, sister, for I do not know.'

May let herself sink down upon the carpet with her hands clasped, as she gazed straight at her sister, looking to her for advice and help, while Claire remained with her eyes fixed, deeply pondering upon their terrible position.

'I can only think of one thing,' she said at last. 'I must see Louis Gravani, and tell him all.'

'No, no; I tell you he will kill me.'

'He loves you, May; and I must appeal to him to act like a gentleman in this terrible strait.'

'Don't I tell you that he is a passionate Italian, and that he would kill me. He always used to say that he felt as if he could stab anybody who came between us. Oh, Claire, what shall I do? My poor life's full of miserable troubles. I wish I were dead.'

'Hush, May, and try and help me, instead of acting in this childish way.'

'There, now you turn against me.'

'No, no, my poor sister. I want to help you, and give you strength.'

'Then you will help me, Claire?'

'Help you!' said Claire reproachfully. 'Did I spare my poor reputation for your sake?'

'Oh, don't talk of that now, only tell me, what shall I do?'

'You must come with me.'

'With you, dear? Where?'

'Home, to your father's roof; and we must tell him all. He will protect you.'

'Come—home—tell poor papa? No—no—no, I cannot—I dare not.'

'You must, May. It were a shame and disgrace to stay here, now that you know your husband is alive.'

'My first husband, Claire dear,' said May pitifully.

'Oh, hush, May; you'll drive me mad. There, go and dress yourself, and come home.'

'I will not—I daren't,' cried May; 'and, besides, this is my home.'

'And Louis? Am I to tell him where you are?'

'No, no. I tell you he would kill me. I must have time to think. Didn't you tell me he was going to wait, Claire? Look here, I dare not see him. No, everything is over between us. You must see him, dear.'

'See him?' said Claire.

'Yes, dear, yes. Oh, Claire, Claire!' she cried wildly,

going upon her knees to her sister, 'pray—pray, save me. Tell Louis I am not married to Frank. Tell him he must go away, and not come back till I write to him.'

'May, how can you be so childish?' cried Claire piteously.

'I am not childish. This is not childish. I know—I know—tell him this, and he will go away.'

'Tell him this?'

'Yes, yes; don't you understand? He is very stupid; tell him I am dead.'

'May!'

'Stop a moment; you said he was going to wait.'

'Till I can give him news of you.'

'Yes; then you must keep him quiet for a day or two, till I have had time to think.'

'There is no time.'

'Give me till to-morrow, Claire. Don't you see I am all confused, and mad with grief?'

'Till to-morrow?' said Claire, gazing at her, for it was like a respite to her as well, in her horrible doubt and confusion of intellect.

'Yes, till to-morrow. I will shut myself up in my room till then, and try and think out what will be best. There, go now. I can't talk to you; I can't think; I can't do anything till you are gone; and I must have time.'

Claire left her at last unwillingly, but with the understand-

ing that May was to stay in her own room till the next day, and await her return.

'It will all come right at last, Claire,' said May, at parting. 'It always does, dear. There, don't fidget. It's very tiresome of him to come now; but I don't know: perhaps it's all for the best.'

She kissed Claire affectionately at parting; and the latter sighed as she hurried home, struggling with herself as to how she should make all this known to her father.

'He must know,' she said; and she entered the dining-room at once, to find that he was absent, though he had been home while she was away.

'Master said he had some business to transact, ma'am, and would have a chop at the Assembly Rooms. You were not to wait dinner.'

Claire went to her own room to think.

May had, in accordance with her promise, gone to hers; then she had written a brief note, ordered the carriage, and gone for a drive, closely veiled. One of her calls was at Miss Clode's, where she entrusted her note, not to some volume to be sold, but to Miss Clode's round-eyed, plump-cheeked niece, who promised to deliver it at once.

END OF VOL. II.

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